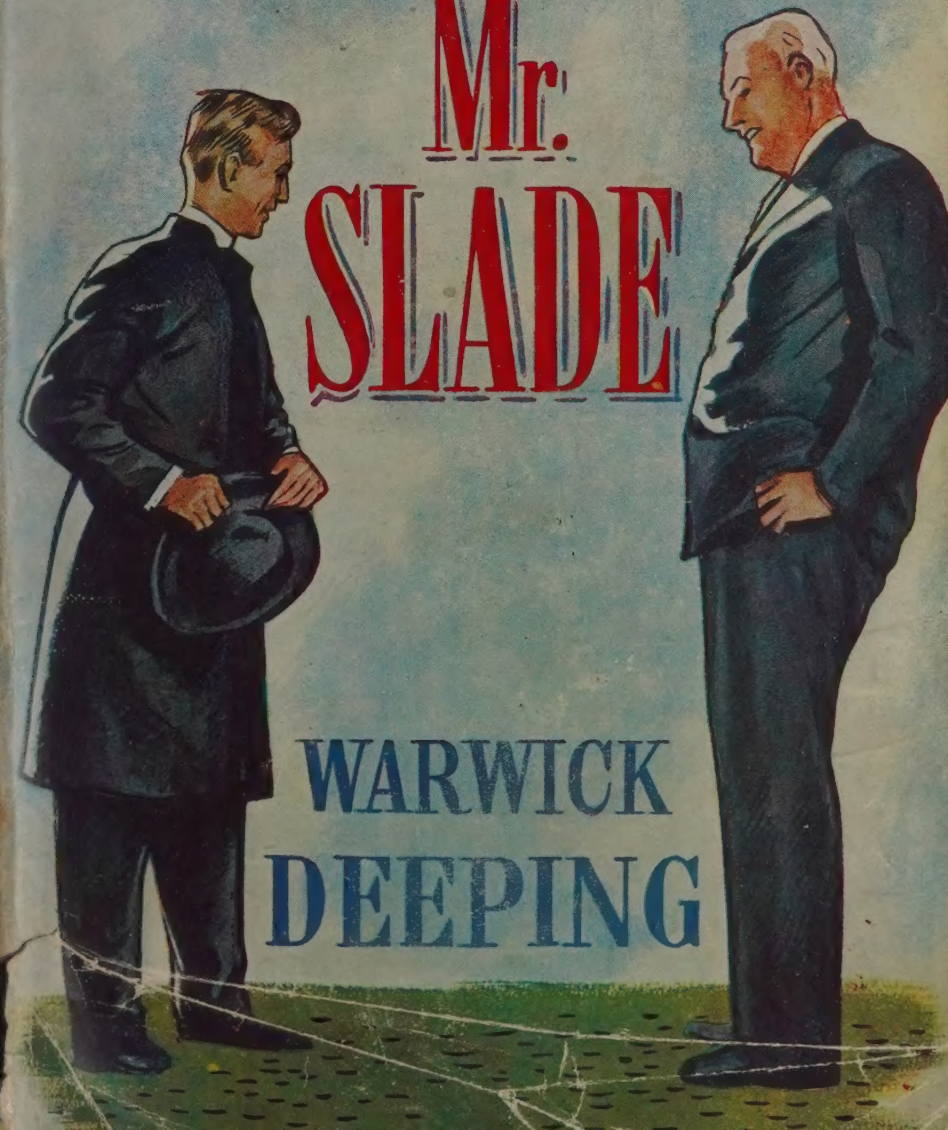
Mr. GURNEY AND Mr. SLADE



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MR. GURNEY AND MR. SLADE

by

WARWICK DEEPING

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I

JAMES SLADE was tired, and legitimately so, for London was sweating in the embrace of a heat wave, and Mr. Slade had been doing business with his wholesalers, so, at Fenchurch Street Station he entered a first-class compartment and, placing his hat in the rack, snuggled down into a corner seat and waited for some official person to arrive, to whom he could tender the additional tribute. Mr. Slade was—for the moment—alone in the carriage, and both windows were down, but this London station seemed airless. Mr. Slade sat and thought of a chair in the garden, and sea-breezes, and a glass of Eliza's home-made lemonade. Moreover, as one of Southfleet's most singular and successful citizens, he could claim, even with humility, the prestige of first-class travel. And in August the Southfleet trains became packed like cattle-trucks, with London's East End pouring forth for its yearly sousing in the sea.

Mr. Slade might be feeling the heat and wishing that he could shed his coat and sit in his shirt-sleeves, but his interest in humanity was unfailing. He sat and watched the crowd teeming along the platform. Third- and second-classes were filling up, and three passengers had stepped over Mr. Slade's feet into the compartment. Perspiring mothers with families to insert fussed up and down. The cockney voice was clamant. Mr. Slade felt like putting his head out of the window to utter soothing words to these agitated parents. "Keep cool, ladies—It makes me feel hotter—seeing you in such a state of heat. The train won't leave without you."

Maybe Mr. Slade remembered that summer day, so many years ago, when he had travelled to Southfleet with a small and shabby bag and a past that was equally shabby. That had been a third-class occasion. Oh, very much so, with poor Clara in

charge of the situation. What a meek, shabby old sheep she must have thought him. A fourth traveller, moist and stout, in frock-coat and top-hat, stepped over Mr. Slade's feet, and banged the door with solid finality. Let none of the unprivileged attempt to enter here. The gentleman sat down with an emphatic grunt, removed his hat and mopped his forehead. Mr. Slade looked at him, and the gentleman looked back at Mr. Slade. His glance was a glare. Even a stare was tactless on so sweltering a day.

Faces peered in and passed. A worried guard with flag and whistle was fussing up and down, trying to find accommodation for superabundant children. The over-heated gentleman glared at any face that showed itself. "Don't you try to crowd in here!" Doubtless his simmering soul had strong views upon the limitation of proletarian families. Mr. Slade disliked him, and dislike made him feel puckish. For twopence-halfpenny he would lean out and invite some bothered mother to enter with her brood. At a pinch the compartment could accommodate three more occupants.

It was then that Mr. Slade became interested in a particular and singular figure. It was that of a little man with a large head, the body of a boy, and frail legs which trotted him up and down with a kind of ambling innocence. The little man was lugging a shabby black Gladstone bag; it bumped against his legs, and was obviously too heavy for his strength. He was dressed in clerical clothes, and his soft hat had seen much wear. Three times did the little clergyman pass Mr. Slade's window, searching for some compartment in which he could take refuge. He was hot and a little bothered but he smiled, and to James Slade that smile was singular and evidential. So was that battered bag, which looked as though it had experienced many stresses and struggles. Mr. Slade was moved by a memory. His bag had been like that bag, only smaller. Mr. Slade got up and leaned out of the window. The guard had his whistle in his mouth, and the last doors were closing. The little man was drifting down again towards Mr. Slade, smiling in a whimsical sort of way at the packed compartments, and Mr. Slade waved to him.

"A seat here, sir."

Mr. Slade's eyes met those of the parson. They were large and luminous eyes, very blue, and with an Irish blueness.

"Room in here, sir."

The man and the bag came to rest opposite Mr. Slade's window.

"Thank you. But—first-class, I'm afraid."

"Well, never mind. Get in, sir, there goes the whistle."

Mr. Slade opened the door, and the little clergyman, after a moment's hesitation, performed the dishonest act of entering a first-class compartment with a third-class ticket.

The overheated gentleman glared at him. He had unbuttoned his waistcoat, and put his feet up on the seat that the little third-class curate was proposing to occupy. And, as for the white-headed old fusspot who had instigated the invasion, he too looked like a "third", and probably was so.

"Excuse me," said the clergyman.

There was some delay in the removal of the big, black, highly-polished boots, and Mr. Slade, who knew all about boots and their owners, became combative.

"Do you possess a handkerchief, sir?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"I suggest that you might dust the cushion."

Someone in a corner chuckled, and the over-heated gentleman glared.

"I suggest you mind your own business."

Mr. Slade smiled at him sweetly. "I do—It is quite a good business."

Meanwhile, the little clergyman was struggling to get his bag into the luggage-rack. It appeared to be rather too heavy for him, and Mr. Slade jumped up, and assisted in the struggle. Then, they sat down and smiled at each other as the train rolled out of the station. The clergyman took off his hat and nursed it. The over-heated gentleman sat and simmered.

There was silence, a satisfied and relaxed silence. The truculent person might exude moisture and a suggestion of over-

heated dignity, but he was in a minority. That chuckle had been significant. Mr. Slade sat and gazed at the clergyman's black bag. A label was pendent from it, and Mr. Slade was trying to decipher the name. For, Mr. Slade had been challenged by a coincidence and its inspiration. Surely this little man might be the new curate whom the Rev. Egbert Jones had engaged for duty at St. Jude's Church. Mr. Egbert Jones had succeeded to the living after the retirement of Mr. Thomas Chatterway, a change that Mr. Slade had had cause to regret. Mr. Challis, the departing curate, had been presented with a country living, and was escaping with relief from the jejune autocracy of his vicar. Mr. Jones was so supremely Egbert, and so was Mrs. Jones, his very earnest and energetic wife.

Mr. Slade had his window down, and suddenly the fat gentleman demanded that it should be raised.

"I'd like that window up."

Mr. Slade said sweetly that he preferred it down.

"I'm not going to sit in a draught."

Mr. Truculence leaned over, pulled the strap and raised the window. Mr. Slade, with smiling deliberation, unhitched the strap and let the window down again.

"Excuse me, my right, I think."

Mr. Slade was giving the gentleman stare for stare when the voice intervened. It said: "Please change places with me, sir. I don't mind the window." The little cleric was smiling into that turgid and angry countenance, and when he smiled in that way his face became the face of beauty, an inward beauty that lit up eyes and lips, brow and skin. Mr. Slade was conscious of sudden wonder, the wonder of a wise old child. Was he being sentimental, or had they a saint in this first-class compartment? Veritably, the little parson was turning the other cheek. And how would Mr. Truculence react to the occasion? Mr. Truculence's angry eyes which had been standing out on stalks, seemed to go back into his head. His wrathful belly became deflated. Almost he found a smile as the light of that other smile played upon him.

"Thanks. That's all right. I'll stay here—Don't want you to——"

Mr. Slade became again the Christian gentleman. He spoke politely to his neighbour:

"How would you like the window, sir? Half-way up?"

"Yes, if you don't mind. I had to hurry, and I'm hot."

Mr. Slade raised the window. "How's that, sir?"

"Just right, thanks."

"Draughts can be dangerous—when you are——"

"Yes, I have to be careful about my chest."

Good manners had returned to the carriage, and there was peace, a peace—so Mr. Slade reflected—that had been the product of a human and forgiving smile.

Mr. Slade was continuing in his attempt to read the label on the bag. The little parson had drawn a small, leather-bound book from his breast pocket and was reading it. The book looked like a testament, but it was not. The clergyman was deep in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Mr. Slade squinted at the label. What was the new man's name? He had heard it, without giving it its proper value. Didn't it begin with a G?—Yes, Gurney. The name up above looked like Gurney.

The journey to Southfleet occupied some sixty minutes, a Southfleet that was splurging into new bricks and mortar, and losing—in Mr. Slade's estimation—its *naïveté* and its innocence. Southfleet was ceasing to be pleasantly Victorian, and its flavour was that of the New Age. There were more first-class carriages on the Southfleet trains, but less first-class people in them. Mr. Truculence was representative of the new Southfleet aristocracy, and business was business. Mr. Slade might allow that beastliness was not inherent in business, unless the greedy beast that is in every man remains unchastened, for, in his meditations upon humanity, Mr. Slade had come to know that man is no angel. Progress, progress, progress! Mock-saints shouting slogans! Envy and greed posing on platforms, and pretending to be what they were not. Might not progress take place in the wrong

direction, and that poor ass—humanity—pursue its tail instead of its head? Mr. Slade sat and reflected, and was moved to consider and to contrast the little curate and the business man. If they had a Christ in the carriage, and that Christ was to smile his smile in Southfleet, what would humanity make of it? Here, indeed, was some problem!

The journey continued and ended in first-class silence and proper attention to the Press. When the train came to its destination, the little curate remained seated until these prosperous gentlemen had made their exit. Mr. Slade also remained seated They smiled at each other.

"Excuse the impertinence, sir, but may I ask if your name is Gurney?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Then—you are——"

"The new curate at St. Jude's."

"Splendid," said Mr. Slade. "I'm a sidesman there. My name is Slade."

They still sat and smiled at each other.

"Well, sir, supposing we get out!"

Mr. Gurney rose to lift his bag from the rack.

"After you, sir."

Mr. Slade got out and stood to help Mr. Gurney out with his bag.

"Anywhere to go to?"

"No. 7, Cashiobury Terrace. Is it far, sir?"

"I'm taking a cab. I'll drop you there."

"Very kind of you, Mr. Slade."

"No, sir, a pleasure."

Mr. Gurney was looking up and down the platform and feeling in a pocket.

"A porter, Mr. Gurney?"

"No. I must pay the extra on my ticket."

"I don't think I should worry."

"But—really—I must. I should be robbing the railway company."

Mr. Slade's eyes were crinkled up with humour.

"Well, I'm a sinner—also. Only second-class. Let me stand treat, Mr. Gurney, as a kind of welcome to Southfleet?"

"Too kind of you, sir."

"Nonsense. I'll settle with the ticket-collector. Can you manage that bag?"

"Oh, easily."

Mr. Slade had not proposed to take a cab. The decision had been an inspiration imposed upon him by the Rev. Mr. Gurney and his bag. The ticket-collector was a friend of Mr. Slade's, for there were few people in the old Southfleet who were not friends of his. Mr. Slade handed out the cash for both parties and made a joke of it.

"Now, Mr. Giggins, don't say you haven't met two honest men to-day."

"I'd pass you any day and every day, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade gave Mr. Gurney a playful look. "Well, I'm not a Barabbas, sir, you see, according to Mr. Giggins."

There was one cab left for hire and Mr. Slade chartered it, and again the driver was one of his familiars.

"Stop at No. 7, Cashiobury Terrace, Potts."

"No. 7 it is, Mr. Slade. Hope you're feeling well, sir?"

"Very well. Almost saintly."

So, Mr. Slade and Mr. Gurney drove together down Southfleet High Street, and along Victoria Road towards Cliff Parade and the sea. Cashiobury Terrace's No. 7 was occupied by the Misses Plimsoll, Euphemia and Caroline, who let lodgings to the elect. The Misses Plimsoll had done for a long line of curates, and, like their famous namesake, it could be said of them that they knew where to draw the line. The cab stopped outside No. 7, and Mr. Gurney and his bag got out. He stretched out a delicate and sensitive hand to Mr. Slade and thanked him.

"Thank you, sir, for all your kindness."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Gurney. I rather think you and I are going to be friends."

II

"MON REPOS" had become "Sea View", and Mr. Slade, confronting all scandal, had gone to live there with his daughter, and now walked daily to his shop in the High Street. Mr. Slade's Pot of Basil had not concealed a human head, nor had the plant endured, but had withered and been thrown upon the rubbish heap, for those who had mattered in Southfleet had refused to recognize any odour of decay. Mr. Chatterway had retained Mr. Slade as a sidesman; Mr. Golightly's Sunday suppers had continued; the old sinner could sometimes be seen taking tea with Mrs. Richmond upon her balcony. And "Slade's" was "Slade's", a super-shop, an institution, yet somehow retaining a Lowther Arcade flavour, and offering to Southfleet books, stationery, leather goods, and fancy work as well as toys. The saying was, "You can get it at Slade's". Phoebe was a partner, and a very capable one at that. Eliza, growing white of head, still cooked for Mr. Slade and his daughter, and was tart with the tradesmen as the autocrat of the kitchen should be. Master George was at Merchant Taylors' School, and boarding with a master. A euonymus hedge had been replanted, for, though Sea View was Sea View, James Slade liked to sit in his chair and go to sleep after Sunday dinner, with a handkerchief over his head, and his privacy respected.

Mr. Slade paid off the cabbie and opened the green iron gate of Sea View. Home! Yes, it was good to have a home to return to in the November of your years, and to know that one was not spoken of as "He". There was no third person about James Slade. He was father, grandpa, the master, and the lips of women did not tighten when he came into the house. There was his chair under the green roof of the veranda, complete with cushions, table and books. Cushions! Comfortable things cushions when they were provided by love and not by fear.

Mr. Slade toddled across the lawn towards the inevitable

chair. The french window stood open. For the moment it was empty, and then it framed a figure.

His daughter. She stood there, the mature young matron, strangely serene and to James Slade still strangely mysterious. Why this mystery, why this serenity? Rose Hallard had had many bitter things to bear, and yet they had not soured her as they had soured her mother. How incalculable were the complexities of the human soul! Was it that Rose was just supremely healthy, and had a son who was not like his father? Surely, there was more to it than that. Sows and cows, human and otherwise, could be healthy, but the soul of a sow did not transcend the trough, and his daughter was the child of her father.

Mr. Slade and his daughter smiled at each other. Had her father had his tea? Yes, a cup and a slice of cake at Fenchurch Street Station. Mrs. Hallard had seen her father arrive in a cab, which was unusual, and caused her to look at him consideringly.

"Ah, that needs explaining it, doesn't it?"

He could suggest a wink, somehow without closing an eye.

"But I'll sit down. It must be eighty in the shade. Bring out a chair, my dear."

He sat down, and his daughter regarded him much as a woman regards a lovable infant.

"Now, what have you been doing?"

"'You naughty old man!'"

"Yes, sometimes—you are very naughty."

"Thank you, my dear. That is a sign of grace. I think I'd like a glass——"

"Eliza's iced lemonade?"

"No, a mild whisky, but you can include the ice."

His daughter bent down and kissed the top of his head.

"Pet, you shall have your whisky."

She brought him his drink, and it was a good one, nor did it cause her to remember that other man whose drinks had been of a stiffer order. She fetched a chair, and sat down beside him.

"Now, why the cab?"

Mr. Slade chuckled. "No need to send for Dr. Richmond.

My heart's as it should be. Do you know the difference between man and woman?"

"Is that a riddle?"

"Human nature is a riddle, my dear, a fact that the fervid gentlemen who wear red ties never remember. A woman likes to be asked questions; a man hates it."

"Guilty conscience?"

"Not always. It is the nature of the beast. Well, I'll answer your question. I took a cab for the benefit of the new curate."

Rose Hallard could not confess to any interest in curates, nor was she interested in any man as a creature of romance. She had suffered such a surfeit of the male, and was so absorbed in her son, that even the strange loyalty of Dr. Charles Richmond had failed to move her. Moreover, her father was always picking up lame dogs, or stray cats, or woeful children, and bringing them in to be cosseted and comforted, and the new curate might be included in that category. And if he was to serve under the Rev. Egbert Jones and the Vicaress, he deserved to be pitied. Master George, who had shown promise as a mimic, had appeared before them one evening in his white nightshirt, with a scarf draped over his shoulders, and holding a book, had given them a rendering of the Rev. Egbert Jones.

"And now—to Gud the Father—Gud the Son, and Gud the Hooly Ghu-ust——"

His grandfather had smothered a chuckle, and reproved him.

"There are some things you must not mock at, my child."

"But, Grandpa——"

"Mr. Jones is doing his best."

So, Mrs. Hallard just sat and asked the necessary question, and threw the ball to her father. "Is he—old?"

"Thirtyish, my dear, but somehow—not quite grown up."

"I forget the name."

"The Rev. John Gurney."

"Oh—yes. And will he suit—Mrs. Egbert?"

Mr. Slade sipped his whisky, and gave his daughter a puckish look.

"Who's being naughty—now? I must confess my dear, that Gurney causes me to wonder."

"Just—how?"

Mr. Slade had decided that he would smoke a pipe, and while he filled it his daughter sat and watched his firm old fingers: no tremor there—as yet. Her father's touch had grown so sure in its humanity. Well, and what had he discovered in John Gurney that was singular?

"You know the kind of questions children ask."

"Have I asked that kind of question?"

"No, my dear. I mean those questions that can be so embarrassing to the cynical and the selfish. Occasionally one meets a grown-up child—who can ask——"

"Awkward questions?"

"Exactly."

"And your Gurney——"

Mr. Slade lit his pipe, and when it was burning nicely, he became philosophical.

"Life's a funny business. You may think you have got it pat, and the whole house in order, and then half a sackful of soot drops down the chimney. No, my dear, Gurney is not soot. I may be wrong, but I do have a feeling about things."

"And about new curates."

"Tut-tut. This may be a very serious—development. I shall be very interested to listen to Gurney's first sermon."

"You mean—he may say things."

"He might, my dear. He's got it in his eyes. The guileless passion for truth. Most disconcerting, you know."

"Not to you, father."

"I don't know about that. I'm often a very naughty old man But imagine the Lord Jesus Christ appearing in the pulpit of St Jude's and talking like Christ, in contrast to the careful and pew-persuading Egbert."

"Awkward things."

"For some of us. No names, no scandal, my dear. But

Southfleet is growing rather full of mere money changers. Gurney might not be popular."

"With—everybody?"

"No, not quite—everybody. Business men are not all just business, and justice may come before business."

"And what will you do, father, if Gurney makes people uncomfortable? Get up and walk out?"

"Think so?"

"Of course not."

"I think I shall just sit and chuckle."

John Gurney had been given high-tea, which meant an egg to it, but the egg itself was not high. It might be a little hard-boiled, if produced by the most respectable of hens in a house that was ordered by the same most respectable breed of women.

Said Miss Caroline to Miss Euphemia: "Well, what do you think of him?"

Miss Euphemia's verdict was that Gurney was a perfect little gentleman, rather shy. There had been days when the Misses Plimsoll had been coy with their curates, but such dreams and simperings had fallen like shrivelled fruit, and both ladies were prim and a little severe, and more interested—so they assumed—in the doctrine than in the man. Miss Euphemia's description of the Rev. John Gurney was—in its superficial aspect—apposite. Shy he was with certain people, sensitive and self-effacing, but this very self-effacement could become a veritable suit of shining armour. He had the supreme courage of his guilelessness and of his Credo. But was it courage—when he was not conscious of it?

He had questioned Miss Euphemia about his new friend. "Do you know a Mr. Slade?"

Of course Miss Euphemia knew Mr. Slade, but she could not accept any social connection. The Misses Plimsoll might let rooms to the elect, but they considered themselves to be gentlewomen.

"Slade? Oh, yes, he keeps a shop in the High Street."

"A very kind old man."

Miss Euphemia stood erect, but her lips were prim. The Misses Plimsoll might swallow all the commandments, including the seventh, but their nostrils became pinched over Mr. Slade's past.

"Yes, quite a character. It used to be a toy shop."

"Has it ceased to be——?"

"No, Slade's still sell toys, and other things. I'm afraid we do not deal there."

When he had finished his tea Gurney stood at the window and looked across Cashiobury Terrace to the sea. He had a curiously long head, one of those heads that seem to be drawn upwards and forwards by visionary things. His black hair fitted it like a skull-cap. His face had a peculiar and perpetual radiance, as though his inward self was always smiling. His profile would have delighted the numismatic artist who wished to decorate a coin, clear-cut, serene, and somehow joyous. Even the sulkiest and most stupid of children seemed to come to life when Gurney looked at them.

There were still a few children playing out there on the grass. Gurney put on his hat and left the decorative dreariness of the Plimsoll domestic art. The Misses Plimsoll had remained in the antimacassar, Pampas grass era. They draped things as they draped their persons and their souls.

Cashiobury Terrace could not be described as a place of beauty. It suggested a Union Jack laid out in grass and gravel, with a border of euonymus hedge and iron railings mounted upon a low brick wall. The Victorian passion for property seemed to express itself in railings, nor was their iron-work that of the Georgian and the smith. It was a cast-iron age even in its new, dogmatic, scientific cockiness. Gurney entered by one of the iron gates, and straightway was confronted with rebellious youth, a truculent small boy who was defying his nurse, and was refusing to go home and to bed.

"Now, come along, Master Harold, come along and be good."

Master Harold had no intention of being good, and his nurse was a delicate and gentle young woman who easily could be

bullied. Master Harold would grow up into the sort of man who enjoyed bullying women. He had a large, white, stubborn face, and expressionless blue eyes.

"I want you to be good."

"I don't want to be good."

"Come along, do."

"I'm not going to bed. You're a silly fool."

The little nurse laid hold of Master Harold's left arm, and he promptly punched her in the bosom. The blow hurt her, and she winced. And then a surprising thing happened to Master Harold. Someone smacked his head, and taking him by the collar, turned him round. The boy was astonished. He looked up into a face that smiled down at him, and smack and smile were both most strangely persuasive.

"Yes, Harold, you are going to bed."

The boy stared. "Why should I?"

"Because God says so—and because I'm asking you to. You won't be unkind to me, will you, Harold?"

A sudden smile spread over the boy's sullen little face. "I'll go —if you'll come too."

Gurney took his hand. "Yes, I'll come, but not to bed."

"Thank you, sir," said the nurse.

When Gurney had shed Harold at the gate of "Balmoral", he raised his hat to the nurse, and turned to follow his own inclinations. Both duty and courtesy demanded that he should call at the vicarage and report his arrival to the Rev. Egbert Jones, but Gurney felt moved to explore his new cure before interviewing that formalist, his vicar. So, Gurney wandered down Cliff Parade to Caroline Terrace and the gardens. Gurney paused by the posts and chains outside No. 19. The prospect pleased him, these sedate and sun-steeped houses, the little gardens, the green shrubbery, the sea. No. 19 had become the Richmond house, for the Hallards, husband and wife, lay in St. Jude's churchyard. Gurney could see the church at the end of the vista, its squat white timber spire catching the sunlight, its porch

dwarfed in perspective by the great holly hedges which flanked the approach. Gurney wandered along Caroline Terrace to Pier Hill, to find himself part of a cockney crowd that was flowing homewards towards the station. It was a characteristic crowd, and suddenly Gurney's bowels yearned in him, for he knew his cockney from A to Z, and his curacies had included parishes in Stepney and Whitechapel. He had been sorry to leave those parishes, but fate and a secret, and his superiors had forced an exodus. Yes, Gurney, like Mr. Slade, had come to Southfleet with a secret. He stood and smiled upon the passing crowd. It was a warm and cheerful and common crowd. It sang, it played upon concertinas, it carried bags of shrimps and jars full of cockles. It tugged children along by the hand, or bore them on shoulders. It laughed, and joked, and was healthily vulgar, and indulged in back-chat, and was big with beer. You could smell the crowd, and to Gurney there was something moving and familiar in this human smell.

"'Ello, what price the Sky Pilot!'

"Blimey, don't 'e look a treat!"

Gurney smiled upon these irreverent souls. Had not they and their like been good friends of his? Had he not married them, and baptized their children, and condoned black eyes and Saturday night celebrations? He could not be put out of countenance by their badinage. Stand up to the common man and smile at him as though you loved him, and he is yours.

Came another voice: "Blimey, if it ain't Mr. Gurney!"

A little, swarthy coster broke step and left the procession. His eyes were bright.

"Gawd, what a surprise!"

"Hallo, Alf."

"What, takin' an 'oliday, sir?"

They shook hands vigorously.

"No, this is my new home. How's Ethel, and the missus?"

"Fine, sir. Wish you was comin' back with us, sir."

"So do I, Alf, in a way."

"Well—in a sense—this 'ere place is 'ome from 'ome. Got a

train to catch, sir. My missus and the kids are on a'ead somewhere with old Bert Bailey. Remember Bert, sir?"

"Of course I do. I hope he hasn't punched any more policemen?"

"Not 'alf. Well, good-bye, sir, and the best o' luck."

"Good-bye, Alf, and God bless you."

For that London crowd had made Gurney realize that he was feeling lonely. Here was this new township, with all its strange people to whom he was nothing but a strange new curate. He felt rather like a small boy turned loose in a new and unfriendly school, nor were his responsibilities those of a small boy. He knew what he knew. He was to be a public figure, a little fellow who had to get up in a pulpit and preach—to what? Not to sinners such as Alf and Bert, but to a respectable and perhaps critical congregation, successful people who might regard him with hostile eyes were he to utter the words that his credo made inevitable. You could crucify yourself upon the cross of truth. Did he not know! And suddenly he wished to be alone, and, threading through the crowd, he made his way to the iron gates and the holly hedges of St. Jude's. The sun was shining on the west window, and almost it smiled at him like the eyes of Bert, that vulgar, sinful, warm-hearted child. Gurney tried the porch door, and found it unlocked. He entered. He heard someone playing upon the organ, softly and with cunning fingers. It was the organist's son, young Bellamy, lame and separative, who had found music comforting to his soul. Gurney tip-toed in and sat down in a very humble seat to listen. He did not know that this had been James Slade's seat in the days when he had cleaned boots and carried up coals.

Young Bellamy was playing Handel. Gurney could just see his fair head swaying slightly to the rhythm like corn in a wind. The funny old church's throat seemed to swell. The music rolled along the roof and into the gallery, and Gurney got on his knees and fixed his eyes upon the pulpit. Some day soon he would be up there, and looking down upon strange and perhaps unfriendly faces! Would he flinch from the message

that was in him? Would he turn, and walk delicately like Agag, and bow down to the top hats and the bonnets? No, by the Lord God Almighty he would not. The music, swelling suddenly, seemed to carry his spirit up on glorious and insurgent wings. His face lit up. He blessed the fair-haired maker of music.

Gurney explored the Old Town before paying his formal visit to the Rev. Egbert Jones. The Old Town was somehow Alf, and Bill and Bert. Here were old-fashioned lodging-houses and tea-gardens, roistering pubs, watermen in blue jerseys, a black jetty which suggested that Southfleet's famous pier had dropped a pup, rival pleasure-yachts the *Skylark* and the *Conqueror* referred to by some as "Sixpenny Sickers". The tide was in, and Gurney was not presented with a picture of a mile of mud, but mud that was washed twice daily by the insurgent sea. Here, too, was that East End crowd, still flowing stationwards, and enjoying life as the common folk can enjoy it. Children might be a little tired and peevish, and too full of shrimps and cockles, but it had been a great day, oh—yes, a great day. The crowd had washed its feet in Jordan.

Gurney strolled as far as the old black jetty. He could feel himself part of this crowd, and warmed by it. Here was human nature in the rough, unvexed by snobbery, and unseduced by Pharisees and Sadducees. Good brown soil—this, not some little prig of a front garden prim with pelargoniums. The old Ship Inn thrust out its white bow windows as though it too was full of beer and *bonhomie*. Its flagstaff flew the Union Jack. Gurney felt cheered and comforted, and reinforced for his interview with the Rev. Egbert Jones. Southfleet was not all Cliff Parade and Cashiobury Terrace. It could sing and dance and be happily vulgar, and not expect you to live in a pulpit and utter prim phrases that would not be offensive to pious pockets.

Gurney rang the vicarage bell. It was one of those grey houses, stucco, with a slate roof, and its windows, somehow, were correct and cold. The doorstep was immaculate, the brass door-fittings perfectly polished. It was a house that expected you to

wear gloves and a very clean collar, and to wipe your feet on the mat before you entered.

A middle-aged maid in cap and apron answered the bell. Mr. Egbert Jones was at home, and in the study preparing his Sunday sermon. Gurney had met his new vicar on a previous occasion, and been catechized and inspected, and accepted. Mr. Jones had described him to Mrs. Jones as, "a rather shy little person, but—I think—quite suitable."

Mr. Egbert Jones rose from behind his desk, and stretched out a large pink hand to his curate. Mr. Jones himself was large and pink and sententious. He had manners. He was very much the gentleman, going bald, but expert in making the most of such hair as he possessed. His handshake was flabby, his voice refined to the level of affectation. The Rev. Egbert Jones had prospects, and his rather protuberant blue eyes were fixed upon a canonry. It was rumoured, too, that he would be appointed Rural Dean. He was carefully impressive, concealing behind a fine façade a certain flabbiness and a culture that was compromise. Mr. Jones was careful not to offend his congregation. He was, in every sense, a comfortable man, vain, self-satisfied, well soaped and scented, but prone to jealousy.

"Ah—Gurney, glad to see you. I hope you find the accommodation I recommended—suitable."

Mr. Jones could never quite get away from the lectern. Even at a garden party he behaved as though he were baptizing infants. He was a fine figure of a man, and he towered over Gurney as a master dwarfs a small boy, and that too was his inward attitude to his new curate. Here was a harmless little fellow who would trot about Southfleet, dutifully performing parochial acts that were boring to The Rev. Egbert.

Gurney was quite sure that he would find his lodgings comfortable. The Misses Plimsoll appeared to be——

"Admirable women, Gurney, and gentlewomen—if a little decayed. Sit down, Gurney, sit down."

He resumed his own seat, and John Gurney took the edge of a hard chair and nursed his hat. That hard chair was not there by

chance. Mr. Jones kept it there to chasten the posteriors of parishioners who could be too confessional.

"Perhaps you would like—a'hem—a little counsel from me, Gurney. This—is a somewhat—peculi-ar parish. It is, if I may say so, a test of a man's tact."

Gurney sat very still, with his eyes on that large, bland face, and Mr. Jones continued. He boomed. He was of the opinion that he had a very beautiful voice.

"Tact, Gurney. One must not offend childish minds. Humanity can be so very childish. And this place, if I may say so, is like hymns—ancient and modern."

Gurney smiled. "The new and the old, sir."

"Quite so. One has to cherish the old, and cultivate the new. New wine and old, Gurney. I have always held it to be my duty to persuade—without offending."

Gurney's smile had died away. He was wondering whether the Rev. Egbert Jones attempted persuasion upon Southfleet's old town, and upon the persons of such children as Bert, Alf, and Bill. Your cockney could be a very irreverent creature, and quite capable of dealing with any braying ass. Also, Gurney was feeling troubled, and discovering in his vicar a problem that loomed and boomed like some large light-ship warning adventurous sailors off the shoals. Tact? Would it be part of his profession to exercise tact in his subordination to Mr. Jones? The prospect did not please him.

"I presume that you prepare your sermons, Gurney?"

"Prepare, sir?"

"Yes, write them. I rather mistrust the extempore. One may say——"

"What the spirit urges."

"Oh, quite so, but sometimes—too much emotion can be unwise. Do you prepare——?"

"I do, sir, at times."

"I presume you have copies that you could submit to me?"

Gurney's smile was sudden and a little strange. "I have, sir.

Do I understand that you would like a sample sermon upon which you can act as censor?"

Mr. Jones put his fingers together. "I hope I am no censorious soul, Gurney, but—I—have had experience. I—know—my congregation. Perhaps, it may be of assistance to you to hear me preach——"

"I have no doubt that it will."

"Excellent. There is no need for haste. When you have savoured the flavour of our township you will be able to adapt —yourself."

Gurney was fidgeting with his hat. He wanted to say: "The flavour of Sunday dinner, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, and no forward and truthful phrases that might cause indigestion." He fiddled with his hat, and glanced at Mr. Jones's manuscript.

"I am very grateful, sir, for your advice. And—now—I realize that I must not trespass upon your time. Your sermon—I think."

Mr. Jones beamed upon him. "Thank you, Gurney. I do take my sermons very seriously. Supposing you call upon me tomorrow about ten. We can go into some of our parochial duties—Sunday School, our obligations to the poor and the sick and the aged. And I must introduce you to my wardens."

Gurney rose, and Mr. Jones, without rising, graciously shook hands across his desk.

III

IT is probable that the Agags of this world find it difficult to understand those exceptional creatures who are without guile. Not that the Rev. John Gurney was completely guileless in his knowledge of human nature. Some ten years of association with the Berts and Bills of this world, and their wives, had steeped him

in benign tolerance. The genus Homo Sapiens was very much out of Eden, but in this imperfect world Gurney had discovered in himself and others a virtue that transcends the frailties of the flesh. He was no metaphysician. Like Saul of Tarsus he had been smitten by the hand of God, and endowed with that consciousness of a mysterious presence which cannot be known save by the very wise and the very simple. Gurney's smile could be the sign and symptom of his inward illumination. Maybe, he was not guileless by nature, but had been exalted to that state of serenity and compassion by the faith that was in him. He could do and say shockingly simple things, just because his vision showed them to him so vividly.

But, Gurney, kneeling beside his bed, had other things to haunt him, the secret that he concealed, the failures that had pursued him. Did he not realize that a man can be too frank and fervid? Assuredly he had been made to realize it. Truth could prove a potent purge, and in the process truth and its propagator may pass out into the pit. Gurney struggled with himself. He could cry; "God give me patience. Have I not to learn that poor, lame humanity must be taught to walk before it can run?"

So, came the Sabbath and his superior's very superior sermon. Gurney had conducted part of the morning service, and now he sat in his seat with a hand to his forehead, and under it he looked and listened. All those strange faces, row upon row of them, demure, complacent, bored, quite expressionless. Well, after all, you could not expect Mr. Jones's words to stir his congregation to enthusiasm. He was sententious and soporific, droning like some big bumble-bee on this hot summer day. It was a dull and a comfortable address, like most of the people who listened to it. And why should it not be dull and comfortable, for was not all well with the Southfleet world, and a nicely barbered God looking down complacently upon all these respectable servants? Change and decay? Oh, nonsense! This was a very prosperous and self-satisfied world, so why disturb it?

The oration lasted twenty minutes, and it left Gurney feeling tired and a little irritated.

"And now—to Gud the Father, Gud—the Son——"

The congregation rose with a rustle of relief. Mr. Jones was kneeling in the pulpit, a piece of pious exhibitionism which he practised and thought impressive. Gurney announced the closing hymn. The organ pealed—"Onward, Christian Soldiers." Gurney sang it with the choir, and his feeling was one of discontent. "Onward, Christian Soldiers, on to Sunday dinner!" He looked at all those static faces. How should such a service end? "Good appetite, good digestion, good sleeping. Amen."

The Rev. Egbert Jones came down the pulpit steps, and the choir and clergymen filed in procession to the vestry. Gurney disrobed himself in some haste. It was probable that Mr. Jones might ask him how he had liked the sermon, and he was in no mood for prevarications. It was an embarrassing occasion, saved by the appearance of the vicar's warden, Mr. Horatio Manning. Mr. Manning had some point to discuss with the vicar, and Gurney, seizing the chance to exercise tact, slipped away.

Said Mr. Manning: "What do you think of him?"

Mr. Jones was hanging up his surplice. "Rather a shy little person, but I think he will suit us."

"Seems harmless. Now—about that estimate for repairs to the choir roof."

The church had emptied itself and Gurney, passing Mr. Kemp, the verger, smiled at him, and went forth into the sunlight. It would seem that no member of the congregation was interested in the new curate, or had waited to welcome him on his first appearance. But that was not quite so. Gurney found two people waiting outside the porch, Mrs. Richmond and Mr. Slade.

Mr. Slade was bare-headed, and holding his black bowler in one hand. Somehow he had never taken to silk. Gurney was also hatless, and carrying his headgear pressed against his chest. He and Mr. Slade looked into each other's eyes and smiled.

"Oh, Mr. Gurney, this is Mrs. Richmond, our dear doctor's wife."

Gurney gave Mrs. Richmond a little, boyish bow, and looked and continued to look. What a lovely face was this, so serene, so happy, so kind! How was it that he had not discovered it, floating like a live flower amid all those other faces? His gaze was like that of a child who has been present at an unhappy party, and has at last discovered someone who is no stranger.

In truth he appeared almost as a child to Lucy Richmond, a child upon whom you could smile and to whom you need say nothing, and the muteness would not matter. Mr. Slade was looking from one to the other, and discovering in their silent scrutiny a mutual understanding. Mr. Slade put on his hat, and wondered whether he ought to leave them. But he had an invitation for Gurney.

"I hope you will be happy here, Mr. Gurney."

How simple the words sounded; and yet Mr. Slade believed that no one could utter words as did the dear doctor's lady, or the doctor's dear lady. Whenever she spoke it was, to Mr. Slade, like a bird singing.

Gurney's reply was like an echo. "I hope to be happy here, Mrs. Richmond."

And that was all they could find to say to each other, but it was utterly sufficient. Besides, as Mr. Slade saw it, what more was there to be said. It was Mrs. Richmond who turned and walked between the great holly hedges with an air that was not one of dismissal. These men were to walk with her, and had she been a court lady with a train Mr. Slade would gladly have toddled behind her, carrying that train. They crossed the Pier Hill, passing through and between the groups of holiday figures. The cockney Sabbath paddled in the sea, and Saints and Kings might wash the feet of beggars.

Said Mrs. Richmond: "How good it must be to escape from the East End."

Gurney pondered that saying, and replied to it: "It is sometimes good to be in the East End."

Mrs. Richmond glanced at him. "You know it?"

"I did."

"And—perhaps——?"

"I found it full of grown-up children."

Mr. Slade was walking with his hands under the tail of his Sunday coat. He waggled them. "Some of us never grow up, hey what! Rather—refreshing."

"Very," said Lucy Richmond.

She paused in the porch of No. 19, as though posing, but quite unconsciously so, for her picture, while the two men raised their hats to her.

"A doctor's house, Gurney, is never quite sure of its time-table, but Sunday supper is our safest meal. Will you join us next Sunday?"

"With pleasure, and thank you."

Mr. Slade and the Rev. John Gurney passed on towards the Cliff Parade and their Sunday dinner.

"I am taking you back with me, Gurney. My daughter expects you."

Gurney looked embarrassed. "How very kind of you—but my good ladies——"

"Afraid of hurting their roast beef?"

"Well, if you like to put it that way, sir."

"Supposing we call and leave word. There will be more for the Misses Plimsoll, and they can draw the line higher."

Gurney glanced at Mr. Slade as though he understood such waggery and enjoyed it. This old gentleman was a pearl whom any cockney would have been proud to pin on a coster's jacket.

"Under welcome pressure—I submit, Mr. Slade."

"You do. Good. I have a better cook than your good ladies and I draw the line higher, as high as a glass of sherry. But perhaps you are Blue Ribbon."

"Not quite, sir. I have been stood a drink in a Stepney pub."

"How sensible and human. Tell me, Mr. Gurney, what did you think of the sermon?"

Gurney looked startled. So sudden and direct a challenge made him catch his inward breath.

"A very—comfortable—sermon."

"Treacle tart, sir."

For some strange reason known only to himself, Gurney winced. Golden treacle—and a tart! How the simple association of ideas could get you!

"Well, sir, it was quite—good in its way."

"Quite," said Mr. Slade tartly.

"I gather that Mr. Jones does not wish to——"

"Stir up—we beseech thee, but gently and with a silver spoon. How would the East End have listened to our Rev. Egbert?"

"I'm afraid it—wouldn't, sir."

"No. Throw eggs, and addled ones. Here we are at No. 7. Shall I go up and break the news?"

"Do you suggest that I am a moral coward, Mr. Slade?"

James Slade chuckled. "No, I don't."

He was thinking that the Rev. John Gurney might be good for Southfleet, but would Southfleet accept such goodness?

The face of Mrs. Hallard was yet another face that Gurney had failed to see in church. She had left before her father, to warn Eliza that there might be three for Sunday dinner. She had gone to church in black, but she was in white when her father and Gurney appeared at the Sea View gate. The little white house with its green veranda and jalousies might have ceased to be Mon Repos, but it was more so than in the old days. Mr. Slade and his daughter were rich in the world's goods, and Mr. Slade had purchased an acre of land that lay at the back of the cliff houses. He had been offered a large sum for it by a speculative builder, and had refused the offer, for Mr. Slade had become a gardener.

Sherry on the Sabbath, and in public! Well, why not? Had not Christ created wine at Cana? They sat, the three of them, in the veranda, challenging the strictures of the censorious. It was very good old dark sherry, and Gurney enjoyed it, and did not hide his glass under his hat.

Moreover, his hostess's hair was the colour of tawny wine. Another lovely person, but for some reason Gurney appeared

shy of looking too closely at Mr. Slade's daughter. Her hair was like some other person's hair, and yet how different. How innocent he had been—! But now his innocence was of a different order. Gurney was playing with a kind of jig-saw puzzle, which was Southfleet, and preparing to put the picture together, as it was or should be.

They talked, or rather Mr. Slade talked about Southfleet and its history, and how, before the railway came, the town was served by packet-boats and coaches. The steam-boat and a mile of mud had produced the pier. Man's ingenuity in the pursuit of profit! And now the petrol engine was on the road and proposing to turn the world upside down.

"Here's a sample, I think."

For, one of those primitive high cars, rather like a phaeton without a horse, rolled into view, and stopped beyond the euonymus hedge. A young man in a bowler hat raised that hat to the sherry party, descended, and appeared at the gate. Mr. Slade got up.

"Hullo, Mr. Charles."

"May I join you, sir, for five minutes?"

"Come along. I want you to meet Mr. Gurney."

Dr. Charles Richmond and Gurney looked at each other, shook hands and smiled, and there was mutual liking in the smile.

"A glass of sherry, Charles?"

"What a scandal, sir."

"Will your diagnosis be the worse for it?"

"But my reputation, sir!"

"Ask Gurney. He has dared publicity."

Charles looked at the little curate. "What do you say, Mr. Gurney?"

"The better the day, the better the deed."

"Very broad-minded of you."

"Broad-cloth, not sack-cloth," said Mr. Slade.

They sat down, and Gurney noticed that Dr. Charles so placed himself that he could look at Mr. Slade's daughter; also,

that he looked at her in a particular way. Gurney did not blame him. It was good to look at particular people in a particular way, especially so when you were in love with them.

"How's the car behaving, Charles?"

"Oh, rather like a woman. Getting old and temperamental."

"Tut-tut! Why not call it experimental?"

"You are right, sir. I apologize."

He held up his glass and looked at Rose Hallard. "Apology accepted?"

Her glance was on his tie but not upon his face. "I think so."

"Amen," said Mr. Gurney, and Mr. Slade chuckled.

Mr. Slade continued to enjoy a nap after Sunday dinner, and not only so on the Sabbath, and Gurney had been given to understand that he should deliver an inaugural address to the Sunday-school teachers and their classes, with Mrs. Egbert Jones presiding. Now, what kind of woman was Mrs. Egbert Jones? If she had any resemblance to Mrs. Richmond or Mrs. Hallard he might not fear the head of Medusa.

Mr. Slade, who was growing happily somnolent, strolled with Gurney to the gate, liking him the better for not overstaying his welcome.

"Might I ask you a question, or rather—two questions, sir?"

"Certainly, if they are not too profound. I find that digestion and philosophy——"

"No. They are somewhat personal. Would you tell me whether the vicaress has any——"

"Snags," said Mr. Slade.

Gurney looked coy. "I did not—exactly—intend——"

"Mrs. Egbert Jones is—episcopal."

"Oh, dear!"

"Remember the lawn sleeves, and the lady's dignity."

"I will."

"And the other question?"

"I wonder—whether you would read my next Sunday's sermon. Apparently—I am to be on trial."

Mr. Slade stood with his hands on the gate.

"You mean—censor it?"

"Yes, in a sense, sir. I would value your opinion. I am afraid I am rather a candid person."

Mr. Slade looked out to sea. "Whitechapel not Kensington. Personally, Gurney, I am prejudiced in favour of frankness. Balaam's ass was a good beast."

Gurney laughed. "Thank you, sir."

"I do not class you with the quadruped. Yes, send me the sermon."

"And you will be frank with me?"

"I will."

IV

THE building was abominably new.

No Gothic mysteries here, no Fra Angelico glamour, and Gurney, who had some colour in his soul and a leaning towards the old, rich ritual, stood for a moment and gazed at the edifice. St. Jude's Parish Room and School.

Shades of St. Egbert, what a hard-boiled building! Corrugated iron, and nasty red paint, and mean little windows, and that horrid little belfry snub-nosed on the roof! The building had a history, but of that Gurney was ignorant. It had been erected in Victoria Road as a Coffee Tavern, horrible anomaly, but the East End visitor to Southfleet had not been interested in Coffee Taverns. King Bung, that jovial fellow, who held court in the Old Town, had lured the crowd from virtue, and the proprietor of the Coffee Tavern had gone bankrupt. The Rev Egbert Jones and his wardens had done a smart piece of business, purchased the building at a very reduced figure, had it removed and re-erected on a piece of waste land behind the church. That

horrid little belfry had been an afterthought. The Coffee Pot had needed no bell.

"Oh, my immortal soul!" thought Gurney. "Why must beauty be turned into the beast?"

Yes, the building was so like the Rev. Egbert, and within it Mrs. Egbert and a sample of Southfleet ladies and a collection of children were waiting for him. He was on show, and supposed to be a bachelor. Almost, Gurney funked the issue. That bathetic building seemed to wear pince-nez. It smirked at him. It was so good.

"Well, here goes," said Gurney most irreverently, and took the plunge into cold water.

He was aware of Mrs. Egbert standing up. She occupied a sort of dais, a very plain and precise lady, sandy hair drawn back from a forehead like a bent knee. She had very pale eyes and sandy lashes, and the suggestion of a multiplicity of teeth.

Everybody stood up. They gazed, some of the ladies with hopeful interest. Here was a new man, and a bachelor. Surely one might divine in him romantic possibilities?

Gurney felt embarrassed. The hall was like a galvanized tank in which eyes goggled at him. It was lined with matchboard stained a meagre brown, and plastered with pious pictures. He found an official smile.

"Oh, please sit down. I am very glad to meet you all."

There was a scraping of shoe-leather and a rustling of skirts. Mrs. Egbert Jones was still standing, pince-nez and teeth aglimmer. Gurney took his cue. It behoved him to pay his respects to the High Priestess. He moved up the gangway between the various classes. The teachers and the elder girls appraised him with inward comments.

"Not much to look at."

"His head's too big for his legs."

"What a funny little fellow!"

"Not a patch on Mr. Masters."

"He's got quite a nice smile."

Gurney arrived at the dais, and saluted Mrs Jones.

"Please step up," said she, graciously.

Gurney stepped up and faced the room. Mrs. Jones, with hands folded, made a little speech. She had much pleasure in introducing the new curate. She was sure that he would find everybody kind, attentive, and helpful. Gurney stood like a small boy, a prize boy. Would the lady moisten a finger and smooth down some tuft of hair on his head?

"And now, ladies and children, I am going to leave Mr. Gurney with you, to give you a little address."

How magnanimous of her! Gurney behaved like a little gentleman. He handed Mrs. Jones down from the dais. Well, that would be a relief. He remounted the dais, and waited until the lady had made her exit. He looked round the hall, smiled, and gave a little clearing of the throat.

"Oh, hell and blimey!" was what he wanted to say.

What he did say, was: "Supposing we call it a holiday and I tell you a story."

There was a murmur of appreciation from the children.

So, Gurney found a chair, and sat down, nursing his hat, and with an air of easy intimacy, told them a story. It was not out of the Bible. It concerned a certain Jack and a Beanstalk and a Giant, with various imaginary embellishments, and no moral. In fact, it had an almost pagan flavour. The younger children enjoyed it. Maybe, the ladies thought Gurney lacking in seriousness and a sense of responsibility.

Several of them discussed it afterwards. Gurney had gone round the classes, smiling and shaking hands. He had been a success with the children, and a bevy of them had followed him homewards.

Said one serious-minded lady to another: "Rather an eccentric person. And somewhat lacking in reverence."

"He doesn't look quite grown up."

"Well, I dare say dear Mr. Jones will take him in hand. Quite a nice smile."

"Yes, quite. I hear he came from the East End."

"That may explain it."

Mr. Slade sat in the garden and read Gurney's sermon. It was an old sermon, written in the days of his young fervour, when the man in him had been moved to fearless eloquence, and neither Mammon nor Human Nature had seemed inseparable. Also, it had been written in the days before a certain human experience had come into his life and chastened some of his daring. Gurney had his heel of Achilles, his thorn in the flesh, nor was he likely to forget it.

Mr. Slade raised inward eyebrows. He might have exclaimed with Bert or Bill: "Gawd strike me pink." Because Gurney's sermon was more than pink; parts of it were lurid scarlet. Had ever such an address been delivered from the pulpit of St Jude's? "No, sir—oh—no, sir!" Mr. Slade both chuckled and looked grave. Did Gurney really contemplate delivering that address to the Rev. Egbert's congregation? Gosh, if so, what a breaking of eggs there would be! What indignation, what horror!

His daughter joined him; she had been writing to Master George. She found her father sitting with closed eyes, a smile on his face, and the manuscript on his knees.

Was he asleep? She sat down softly, and without opening his eyes, Mr. Slade addressed her.

"In confidence, my dear, would you like to read—a sermon?"

"A sermon?"

"Yes, by Gurney. He asked me to—criticize it. I'm rather flabbergasted."

"Is it—so—dull?"

Mr. Slade shot out his feet and sat up. "Dull! It's like a box of fireworks all going off at once, or two Tom-cats fighting in a hamper."

"Good gracious! He looks such a quiet little man."

"Read it, my dear, and give me your opinion. Not a word to anybody."

He passed her the manuscript, rose, and went forth to see if the plums on his early plum-tree were ripening.

Mr. Slade was absent for a quarter of an hour. He had discovered some broken glass at the bottom of a wall, which was

significant, for Mr. Slade, that good old man, was not quite Gurney. He had found it necessary to have his wall topped with broken glass in order to preserve his fruit from plundering louts and small boys, for, not only did they thieve the fruit, but they broke the trees. So, someone had been exercising spite, whacking at the glass *chevaux de frise* with his stick. No one had been over the wall, and Mr. Slade rubbed his chin and philosophized. Boys would be boys, and men would be men, and to justify the greeds and envies of human nature prophets would propound a new political system. It was in the process of propagation, and Mr. Slade, who called himself a Liberal, was interested in it. He could confess to being a man of property, and in his case it was a clean product, and he may have been prejudiced, but he failed to see why he should be despoiled of it for the benefit of the greedy and the thriftless.

Service, not profit! The redistribution of wealth! What humbug! In a completely angelic world such an ideal state might be possible, but it was not an angelic world. Did any workingman, so called, put service before wages? Was not the main appetite material? What were these gentlemen agitating for, haloes or more cash? Damned humbug! Man could be an ingenious, mealy-mouthed hypocrite.

"Redistribution of wealth! Poof!" thought Mr. Slade. "Let them talk about the redistribution of brains, and then—I will listen."

He returned to his daughter, to find her gazing at the distant sea, with Gurney's sermon lying in her lap.

"Well, my dear, what is the verdict?"

She said, dreamily: "I think it is a wonderful sermon."

Mr. Slade sat down.

"Far too wonderful for Southfleet. And far too wonderful for any human family."

She came out of dreams to look at him with some surprise.

"You—think so?"

"I'm afraid I do, my dear."

"But, isn't it sincere?"

"Terribly sincere. Gurney may be one of those saintly persons who assume too much, and believe that other people are as sensitive and ungreedy as he is."

"But if he feels like that, isn't he right to—be honest?"

"Of course he has that right. But the question is, Rose, how much good will he do, how much harm?"

"Harm? Could it do harm?"

"It could do a great deal of harm to Gurney."

"You mean, he would make enemies?"

"Of course. And doubtful friends."

"How—doubtful friends?"

Mr. Slade glanced affectionately at his daughter.

"My dear, it isn't a disinterested world, and never will be. It's patchwork, and some of the patches are pretty shabby. Unfortunately, when a man begins to preach pure altruism, quite a number of people read into his words that which he never intended. Yes, unfortunately, the highest motives may stimulate the worst desires, persuade human nature to put on a surplice and translate robbery into what they call redistribution. So, you think I'm an old cynic?"

"Oh, no."

"Man is not a bad sort of creature, but he has his limitations. Give him a text and he may turn it into a tyranny. We are so clever at legalizing that which the carnal man in us lusts for. Man is a jealous beast, and given their way most men would like to be little Jehovahs."

"Are you—one?"

"Bits of me are. I try to chasten those bits. Just one question. I suppose you think George a very ordinary sort of boy?"

"Ordinary?"

"Yes. Just capable of becoming a dustman or a bricklayer's labourer."

"Of course I don't. George is——"

Mr. Slade chuckled. "Well, there you are! Just—human nature. Maternity. Does any Mrs. Smith think that little Smith is no better than the little Jones next door?"

"I suppose not. One is prejudiced."

"Ah, prejudice! Well, why not? Why skim off the cream and call it no better than skilly?"

Mr. Slade wrote a note to Gurney, and left it at No. 7 Cashiobury Terrace on his way to business.

"I have read your sermon with great interest. May I discuss it with you? You will find me at home after six."

Gurney responded to the invitation. Even during those first days, he had been hearing things about Mr. Slade and Mr. Slade's history. It really was a most extraordinary story, and yet Southfleet appeared to have accepted Mr. Slade and his past and to have made quite a worthy of him. Well, Mr. Slade should know something about life and human nature and the martyrdom of man, and if the preaching of such a sermon could put the preacher in the pillory, Mr. Slade might tell him so.

Mr. Slade did tell him so. He was frank and fatherly, and unexpected, in that actually he had read Karl Marx and Engels, and the Fabian tracts, and he did not prate about what he did not know. Gurney sat and listened. He had not read Karl Marx; his God was Christ upon the Cross. And was it not a priest's duty to preach Christ crucified?

Mr. Slade was gentle with him. "Yes, to the few. But to the many, not so freely. Remember the cunning of the serpent, Gurney."

"What, exactly, do you mean, sir?"

"Man should be known by his works—more than by his words. Begin by playing with children and they will have faith in you. I would begin by playing with the children, grown up and otherwise."

Gurney sat and smiled. "As you did, sir?"

"Who has been gossiping?"

"It was very kindly gossip."

"I'm glad. Words, Gurney, can sting. They resound like smacks, and would you begin by smacking children?"

"I see your point."

"Of course you do. Persuade children to love and trust you, and you can smack them—justly and with impunity. The trouble with a man like Karl Marx is that he damns a whole class to prove his theory. No class can be damned in that way."

"I agree. Our modern world——"

"Grew. And why? Why did it shape itself as it has done? Marx evades the issue. Surplus value, exploitation. What about —surplus brains?"

"Not brains alone, sir."

"No, character too. Men aren't ninepins to be knocked over haphazard. And there is a Chinese saying."

"Yes, sir."

"Softlee walkee catchee monkey."

Gurney laughed. "And—Southfleet—is my monkey?"

"It would be. I know several other souls in this town who have caught their monkey."

"You, sir, for one."

"Make no song about me, Gurney. If you care to preach that sermon five years hence instead of next Sunday——"

"I'll take your advice, sir."

"Then you are a very exceptional man, Gurney, and I take off my hat to you."

V

DR. CHARLES RICHMOND had spoken of the Rev. John Gurney to Dr. Corrie Richmond as "A funny little fellow", and Dr. Charles was to think him still funnier before the summer was out, for he had seen Gurney, trousers rolled up, paddling in the sea with a collection of cockney children. Dr. Charles Richmond, being the young physician, was very much upon his dignity, much more so than was his father, and a little self-conscious about his youthful appearance. He had suggested growing a beard, but his mother had negatived it.

"Curious little bloke—that."

Charles shed some of his fine feathers when he was off duty, and relapsed into the vernacular.

"Who, dear?"

"The little parson. Saw him paddling and sailing boats."

"Well, why not, Charles?"

"Not very dignified."

His father was secretly amused. "Maybe, Charles, the most dignified people are those who can forget about—dignity."

Charles looked carefully across the table at his father. "Pulling legs, pater?"

"I will, if you feel like putting one out to be pulled."

"Nothing doing."

But, as it happened, Dr. Charles was a little previous in his opinions, and was sufficiently frank to modify them. Physicians should not be prejudiced, especially in the making of diagnoses. Charles returned from the Old Town one September evening, looking hot and thoughtful. He had been called out upon an emergency case, to discover that a certain person had been there before him.

"Well, Charles, any excitement?"

"I should say so. Tommie Pond on the war-path."

"Drink, again?"

"Fighting drunk, and knocking his wife about. That was before I arrived. Hit her with a saucepan, and then got into a scrap with Fred Childs. Somehow, I have changed my mind about the little curate chap."

"What had he to do with it?"

"Quite a lot. Apparently he walked in and stopped the fight, and when I got there Tom was as tame as——"

Charles sought for the simile and it eluded him. The pork chop that he was eating appeared to be somewhat tough, and for some seconds he dealt meditatively with a mouthful.

"Was Mrs. Pond badly hurt?" asked his mother.

"Oh, a scalp wound. Had to sew it up. And Tom sat in a corner, snivelling. The padre had reduced him to tears."

"Probably alcoholic," said his father.

"Oh, probably," said the son. "Don't these people ever learn self-control?"

"Self-control is a late arrival in the social scheme. There are three points about the average working-man that you ought to know, Charles."

"What are they?"

"Firstly, that the uneducated man knows everything. Secondly, that he sulks if you suggest that his knowledge is not universal. Thirdly, that his goodwill or badwill towards you is purely emotional, and that it may cost you no more than a shilling."

"Oh, Corrie!" said his wife.

"I'm afraid it is true—in the main, Lucy. One has to cultivate a benign tolerance, and not to expect too much."

But there were other incidents in the career of Gurney that caused Southfleet to wonder.

He wore shabby clothes.

The state of his wardrobe caused the Misses Plimsoll to pull wry faces.

His socks! And the tails of his shirts! He appeared to possess only two shirts, one in the wash, one on. Moreover, these deplorable garments were not fit to be sent to a self-respecting laundry. As a gentleman's shirts they were a disgrace.

How could you doctor such tatters?

And his shoes needed soling.

After all, Gurney received a hundred and twenty pounds a year, and the cost of his board and lodging amounted to only twenty-five shillings a week. What became of the surplus? Yes, Euphemia, answer me that!

The Misses Plimsoll discussed the problem. Really, Mr. Gurney must be spoken to about his linen. It was quite indecent for such shirts to leave No. 7, Cashiobury Terrace for Southfleet's Sanitary Laundry.

"You had better speak to him, Caroline."

"Why me?"

"You see more of him than I do, and you are older than I am."

"Just seventeen months," said Miss Caroline, tartly.

Miss Caroline did dare to speak to Gurney about the state of his wardrobe. She elevated it to the level of a duty, an almost maternal duty.

"Do you mind, sir, if I mention a certain matter?"

"What is it, Miss Plimsoll?"

Miss Caroline put her mouth in order. "It's—your clothes, sir. I mean—your underclothes. You really do need some new ones."

"Do I?"

Now, I ask you, should not a man know the state of his own shirt-tails?

"They really are, sir, past—mending—and washing."

"Dear me, as bad as all that?"

"I'm sorry to say they are, sir."

Gurney looked coy. "Thank you, Miss Plimsoll. I will do something about it."

The Rev. John Gurney purchased two new shirts, and some socks and etceteras, not from Mr. Chignell in the High Street, but from a new, cut-price shop in the Victoria Road. The Misses Plimsoll had a very poor opinion of the new etceteras. If you held them up to the light you could almost see through them.

"Dear, dear, what rubbish!"

"He will sit through them in a month."

Miss Caroline looked austere. "I wouldn't have put it quite like that. What the poor man needs is a mother."

Then, there was another incident upon which the good ladies felt it their right to register a protest. There were limits to the refined patience of No. 7.

It happened too, on a Sabbath. The Misses Plimsoll had prepared for Gurney a good Sabbatarian and English dinner, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Miss Euphemia might not have surprised the scandal had she not found that she had forgotten a handkerchief and gone upstairs to fetch one. Miss Euphemia had

a slight cold in the head. And what did she see when she happened to look out of the window, a most dirty tramp squatting on the little lawn, and Gurney presenting him with his plate of good Sunday food.

Miss Euphemia rushed downstairs to tell her sister.

"A—tish—oo. What *do* you think he is doing?"

What could Gurney be doing but eating his midday meal?

"Eating his dinner, I hope."

"No, giving it to a most disgusting tramp, and in the front garden."

"Good gracious, the man's mad!"

Miss Caroline had to run upstairs and see the sight for herself. There was no doubt about it. A hairy, red-nosed gentleman sat on the green grass carpet with the plate between his knees, and Gurney was chatting to him. The gentleman's trousers were frayed and patched, his coat ragged, and a deplorable hat reposed beside him. Well, I never! Southfleet did not believe in selling all you had and giving it to the poor. Nor does anybody, for that matter. Even the benign Dr. Richmond could say: "Never have anything to do with unlucky people. It may not be bad luck, but a rotten heredity." And he could say: "Many of the people whom I treat for nothing give me more trouble and less gratitude than the patients who pay." Miss Caroline was shocked. Fancy a man giving away her good food to a drunken scarecrow like that!

The window was open at the top, and Miss Caroline heard the scarecrow say: "You haven't got a pair of boots you could spare, guv'nor?"

"I may have," said Gurney. "I'll go and see."

Oh, would he! This reckless debauching of the sponging class must be arrested. Miss Caroline, full of indignation and a sense of duty, confronted Gurney on the stairs.

"Mr. Gurney, how—*could*—you?"

"What, Miss Plimsoll?"

"Give away the good food we had cooked for you to a creature like that? And—in—our—garden!"

"The man hadn't had a meal."

"So he said. Look at his nose, Mr. Gurney, just look at his nose!"

Gurney looked down on his own nose at the lady.

"It was—*my*—dinner, Miss Plimsoll. I don't ask for a second helping."

"I should think not, sir. And I think I heard him ask for boots."

"He did."

"You must be very innocent, sir. Don't you know what he will do with the boots? Sell them and buy drink. I really must protest."

"Must you, Miss Plimsoll?"

"Yes, I must. We can't have a scene like this in our front garden. I am going to send the man away."

Send him away she did. The tramp was mopping up good gravy with a piece of bread, but Miss Caroline snatched the plate away from him.

"Go away—at once, or I'll send for the police."

The scarecrow, having filled his belly, winked at her.

"Right you are, old dear. I've had the fat, and you're a bit tough and gristly, aren't you. Take it and wash up."

And with this insolent adieu, he collected his hat and a sack, belched, and departed.

Southfleet heard of this incident, for one or two neighbours had witnessed the strange scene, and had commented upon it both kindly and unkindly. The Rev. John Gurney might be hailed as a Christlike creature, or as an eccentric, or even as a histrionic person who could pose to his public. The news was passed to the Rev. Egbert Jones and to Mrs. Jones. They discussed it at breakfast, and the vicaress was of the opinion that Egbert should speak like a father to Gurney.

"I don't think he can quite appreciate the—a'hem—atmosphere of this parish. It isn't Poplar, Egbert."

"No, my dear, but——"

"Don't you see that it is bringing disrespect upon the cloth?"

Mr. Jones had just suffered an accident with the marmalade pot, and the lapse was suggestive.

"After all, Emily, it is somewhat in the tradition."

"What tradition?"

"Of the primitive church. I'm not a mediaevalist; I move with the times, but if a curate of mine chooses to give away his dinner, what cause have I to——?"

"My dear Egbert, it is too stagy. Now I come to think of it, he does remind me a little of Henry Irving."

"But his dinner is his dinner, to do with as he pleases."

"It would have been much better inside him, than——"

"I may agree, Emily, but it doesn't follow——"

"I think you are being very short-sighted. We don't want a mountebank in the parish. Unless this kind of thing is checked —it may——"

"May what?"

"Cause criticism—and a schism. You know how foolish people are. If Gurney poses as a saint——"

"Well, he may be a saint, Emily."

And then Mrs. Jones said a very significant and prophetic thing.

"It might—er—affect your—authority, Egbert."

"My authority?"

"Yes, I don't think it does for a subordinate to be too popular."

Maybe, those words of his wife's planted a drop of slow poison in the mind of the Rev. Egbert Jones, but, for the present, he chose to maintain a discreet watchfulness, and what he described as tolerance and an open mind. His little curate might make an ass of himself, so far as Mr. Jones was concerned, provided that the ass was not a beast of Balaam. Probably, Gurney was one of those harmless idiots with too much emotion and not enough mind, and Southfleet would smile at him and find him a suitable nickname. Something like "Little Johnny Kiss the Kids", or "Our Shabby Saint", or even "Dear Little Blarney!"

Yet, there were other people who were persuaded to take Gurney very seriously, and Mr. Slade and Dr. Corrie Richmond

were among them. Mr. Slade, being himself somewhat of a saint, and not in conscious competition with any St. Francis, divined in John Gurney that rare guilelessness and ardent integrity which to the worldly may seem histrionic humbug. All great art is founded on simplicity, and the artist may partake of that simplicity, be he priest, poet or painter. Mr. Slade could assert that there was an art of Beautiful Behaviour, though it might be more rare than creation in colour, and the more Mr. Slade saw of Gurney, the more convinced was he that Gurney was an exponent of that art. He was utterly and strangely free from snobbery. He did not talk down or up, and he could talk to any man with a naturalness that was unconscious art and good humanity. He could talk to the watermen and fisher-folk, the labouring men, and publicans and sinners as though they were just men and he just such another man. He might be found sitting in a cottage scullery chatting to the good wife while she did her washing. He had even been seen helping to hang out that same washing.

Mr. Slade understood that this complete lack of snobbery might offend a part of Southfleet. That was the most strange thing about the Christian cult as practised by the many. Their God had been a carpenter's son and a simple craftsman, but no carpenter could be admitted to a drawing-room save as a craftsman, and he could not be recognized as a social equal.

There was old Robinson the carpenter, who still sang in the choir, an old man with a beautiful head and a beautiful nature, but to some mutton-headed conventionalists among the ladies he was just Robinson, an inferior creature who wore an apron.

Mr. Slade might argue the matter with his daughter, for both of them had passed through the Valley of Snobs, and arrived at natural courtesy. Mr. Slade kept a shop; his daughter had been the daughter of an hotel-keeper. Moreover, Mr. Slade, with a scandalous past to his credit, could be regarded as one of those unique examples of God's mercy, a brand that had been snatched from the burning.

Said Mr. Slade to Rose: "There are two forms of humbug,

one which asserts that all men are equal, the other which assumes the false inequality of the snob. The most obvious thing in life to any impartial observer is the unequal social value of various men."

"Yet, they call you a Radical."

"And so I am, I suppose, my dear, in the radical sense. I like to get to the root of things. Social status should depend upon social value. Life should sift out the dross from the fine metal."

"But if men had equal chances?"

"The ladder would still remain, my dear. Some would climb, some would squat in stupid sloth at the bottom. The older I grow the less love I have for the theorists, and the cold-blooded and busy people who must mind everybody's business but their own. Your idealist can be a most dangerous person and often so very unlikeable."

"Then—if Mr. Gurney——?"

"I think there is something different about Gurney. He lives the life, and doesn't merely prate about it."

Dr. Corrie Richmond was a True Blue Tory, perhaps because he was brought into close contact as a healer with the aristocracy of brains and of health. Not that poor physique condemned a man to dwell with the slugocracy; a fine and sensitive soul could inhabit a delicate body, like a tempered blade in a flimsy scabbard. More spirit and less crude flesh to clog it. For, regarded as a physical specimen, the Rev. John Gurney was not impressive, below the level of his chin. Two of him might have gone to the making of a blacksmith, but no two smiths could have forged his spirit.

In the vulgar parlance Gurney was a "Surprise Packet". Dr. Richmond found him one day sitting beside the bed of one of his patients, a particularly difficult patient, one of those surly souls who appear to be born with a hereditary grievance. Young Smiles—the name did not fit him—was a painter and decorator, a meagre, disgruntled creature with an incompetent chest. In winter he suffered from asthma and bronchitis, and to Smiles his physical disharmony was due to the social dishar-

monies which embittered him. He had to paint doors and windows in cold weather; that was an injustice. He also had to paint stuffy and dusty interiors, and that too was an injustice. All Bob Smiles sentences began with a "Why?" "Why should I be like this? Why should I have to——? Why can't I be——?" Dr. Richmond described him as a creature born with a paltry body and a sore soul. And was the sore soul the product of the paltry body?

The man had one of those rabid, bitter little faces, a smudge of a black moustache, poor and prominent teeth, pale yet angry eyes. He was like a rat nibbling at something, and that something was a grievance. Why, why, why? Dr. Richmond did not like Bob Smiles. He suffered him. The fellow had the gift of the gab, and a sneering discontent that could poison other men.

And here was Gurney sitting beside the bed of a poor little prig who boasted that he was an atheist. Gurney stood up with that luminous smile of his, and made it plain that he would efface himself and leave the patient to his doctor.

"I'll get out of the way, sir."

"No need, Mr. Gurney."

"Well, I have work, like you have, doctor."

The sick man's eyes were on Gurney. "Thank you for coming—though I don't believe in your stuff."

How gracious! Gurney smiled from the doorway. "That doesn't matter, Bob. We're just men together."

Dr. Richmond sat down to question and examine his patient. Yes, there was no doubt about it, Robert Smiles was better. If one could get the bug of self-pity out of him he might be better still.

"You're on the mend, Smiles."

"I can't take that last medicine."

"Well, don't take it. Try a dose of Mr. Gurney."

Bob looked surprised and supercilious. "Him? Funny little bloke. Means well—I suppose. Just a dope-merchant."

Dr. Richmond folded up his stethoscope. "Well, try a dose of the dope, my lad. Your trouble is, if I may say so, that you

feel sore with yourself, and sulk about it. A little soothing syrup might do you good."

VI

IN Southfleet it was considered unseemly to be known as a Radical in politics, though, to more modern ears it would sound very mild music. Mr. Slade was reported to be a Radical, but then Mr. Slade was a somewhat exceptional person, and his social heresy was tolerated, for he was not bitter, and he did not proselytize. To be a Tory suggested beer and good old port. Your Radical was apt to be a gingery person, though he drank lemonade or barleywater. Mr. Simmins, the local tax-collector, was a Radical, and unpopular. Mr. Gavin who edited the progressive paper, was also a Radical, and if not liked, respected. Southfleet believed in labelling people, and so it became necessary to label Gurney, though the Church should be considered superior to politics.

Had Gurney been asked to label himself, he would have been puzzled.

"What are my political views? Well, really—I don't know."

Lovely innocence, for the world was becoming more and more political in a rather unpleasant and snarling fashion.

Mr. Robert Smiles had started a Socialist Club for fellow workmen. Its membership was infinitesimal, but the very existence of so acrid a society caused conventional Southfleet to see red. One of Mr. Smiles's public snarls was reported in Mr. Gavin's paper, and it shocked Southfleet very seriously. This ranting little demagogue talked revolution. Down with the King, down with the House of Lords, and the Episcopate. Some of Southfleet's old women were frightened. Surely, the Police ought to do something about it?

The local Inspector smiled all over his large, good-humoured face when official interference was suggested.

"What, sir, bother about—that? If there were trouble at any time Bob Smiles would be the first to get under the bed."

Robert Smiles had not read the book written by his distinguished namesake. "Self Help"—indeed! Mr. Smiles's vision of the future state was that of a large sow giving suck to all her progeny, but Mr. Smiles did not pass on to reflect that what might be good for swine might be disastrous for man. Gurney was out to prove that man had a soul, and that it was not his fate to be a mere sucking parasite, and it was upon this question of God, Man and Soul that the Rev. John Gurney caused a part of Southfleet to look askance at him.

Mr. Robert Smiles, up and working, and having accumulated during his illness an additional reserve of venom, challenged Gurney to appear at his club and debate God and the dope scandal. Gurney took up the challenge. He and Mr. Smiles stood up and confronted each other before a dozen or so rather silent and embarrassed working-men, for your working-man may have a sense of courtesy, and Bob Smiles was a cad when his tongue got going.

"Now, Gurney, have you ever seen your God? Have you ever heard him? Have you ever witnessed a miracle? Give me one pinch of proof——"

Gurney sat and smiled, quite unangered by his adversary's rude arrogance.

"What are eyes and ears, Mr. Smiles, but of the flesh?"

"Well, what's man but flesh?"

"Spirit," said Gurney, promptly.

"Like the stuff in a bottle, eh! Show me an ounce of your spirit."

"I am afraid I could not. The inward eye is necessary."

"Inward eye be blowed! Walk out your God, Gurney."

"I cannot do that, for He is within me."

"Feel him inside you, do you?"

"Yes, Mr. Smiles, I do. God is present in me. I feel Him. I know."

Mr. Smiles became even more sarcastic, but, for some reason or other the audience was in sympathy with Mr. Gurney. It was more taken with his luminous smile than with Bob Smiles's venomous mouth. It began to murmur and shuffle its feet, till, at last, a florid man with a large moustache let fly in the vernacular.

"Stow it, Bob! Maybe the gentleman's got somethin' you 'aven't."

"Yes, superstition, humbug," said Mr. Smiles.

"Stow it! We 'aven't asked 'im 'ere to be insulted."

The report that Gurney had attended a meeting of the Socialist Club spread through the town, and provoked considerable comment. It came to the ears of the Rev. Egbert Jones, and Gurney's vicar felt it his duty to catechize his curate.

"Is it true, Gurney, that you joined in a debate at a particular place?"

"Quite true, sir."

"But, my dear friend, I must say that I deplore any political adventures."

"It was not a question of politics, sir."

"Then, what——?"

"The discussion was on the existence of—God. Robert Smiles calls himself an atheist."

Mr. Jones raised his hand. "What have we to do with a vulgar and ignorant little demagogue like Smiles? Such people are best ignored."

"You may be right, sir—but I did feel that——"

"Yes, yes, I know. The urge to testify. But, I think, Gurney, that your presence there was—ill-judged. One should not flatter a—whippersnapper—by arguing with him. And—gossip has been busy. I deplore gossip. It is so prone to become garbled."

"I am sorry, sir."

"Well, well, just an error in—tactics. But, please, Gurney, in future consider the cloth."

As Mr. Jones had hinted, garbled accounts had got about, and what Gurney gained on the swings, he lost on the round-

abouts. Working-class Southfleet might think him something of a saint, but there were other people who saw him as a sinister shadow. Mr. Sawkins, who owned the Caroline Hotel, and was on the committee of the Conservative Club, raised the point in public. What sort of little parson was this who talked red revolution, and got himself mixed up with scallywags like Smiles? Mr. Sawkins was very candid upon the scandal. He thought that the question ought to be taken up with the Rev. Egbert Jones. If Mr. Jones could not keep his pup from lamp-posts, the creature had better be found another kennel.

Gurney liked to be out and about early, and knowing that Mr. Slade was an old gentleman of regular habits, he would stroll up to Sea View and join Mr. Slade in his progress along the Cliff Parade and Caroline Terrace to the High Street. Mr. Slade was a comforting person when a proportion of the population was beginning to give you unfriendly looks. The windows of Caroline Terrace watched them pass, and the comments were various and characteristic. Mrs. Richmond said that Mr. Slade and Mr. Gurney might have been father and son. Mr. Sawkins snarled in his beard. A fellow who had been in gaol was just the partner for a clerical agitator like Gurney.

Said Gurney to Mr. Slade: "I hope you do not feel—embarrassed—by walking with me?"

Mr. Slade glanced up and caught Mr. Sawkins playing Nosy Parker at a window.

"Ha, it's a dirty bird that fouls its own beard! No, sir, and I feel flattered to have your company."

"I'm afraid I'm a disgrace, Mr. Slade, with a part of my congregation."

"So was—Christ, sir."

"You see, I did not think I should be blamed for defending my faith."

"Did you really attend a meeting of Mr. Smiles's Venom Club?"

"I did. But, all men are not venomous, and strange though it may sound—I did not lack for sympathy."

"You wouldn't. The hyena and the dog are different creatures."

"But it makes one rather sad, to be misjudged and misrepresented."

"In a very prejudicial world, Gurney?"

"I suppose it is—so."

"Our opinions—so called—are three parts prejudice and one part honest conviction. I shouldn't worry, Mr. Gurney. Just go on being what you are."

"Thank you, sir. I have had troubles and trials of my own to chasten me."

"Same here," said Mr. Slade. "Come and have some supper with us to-night."

But one morning Mr. Slade walked solus along Caroline Terrace, and Mr. Sawkins waylaid him. Old age was making Mr. Sawkins very crusty, and more and more of a curmudgeon. He called a spade a spade, and it was a very unpolished tool.

"Morning, Slade."

"Morning, Sawkins."

Mr. Slade became naughty when Mr. Sawkins fouled the sweet face of a sunny morning. Egg and bacon in beards, and gravy stains upon waistcoats! Mr. Sawkins was septic to Mr. Slade's soul.

"If I were you, Slade, I wouldn't encourage that little parson fellow."

"But you're not me," said Mr. Slade.

"No, I haven't had the privilege——"

"I shouldn't say what you thought of saying, Sawkins."

"Ha, thought-reading, eh! If you want to encourage a fellow to preach your property away——"

"And yours? Supposing you mind your own business. It may need it."

Which was a nasty cut, for the Caroline Hotel was not prospering under Mr. Sawkins's skinny management. Mr. Slade would like to have added: "And go in and comb and wash your

beard, and don't suck your false teeth." Mr. Slade was a very clean old gentleman.

The Rev. John Gurney was shy with women, or rather—with the ladies. He had been a romantic soul, and romance had served him an unkind trick, but that was his particular secret. His reputation was that of a celibate, but there were ladies in Southfleet who had hopes of seducing him from the high level of his austerity. Miss Godbold was one of them, a stout and vigorous gentlewoman who walked with a stick, and competed with Mrs. Jones in the running of the parish. Miss Godbold was mannish, even in her make-up. She wore a hard collar, and an expression of soapy and saintly determination. She had views upon most subjects, and aired them. If you were the creature of a certain habit, Miss Godbold would try to convince you that you should change that habit. If you took sugar in your tea she spoke earnestly upon the virtues of tea without sugar. She had a very cold blue eye, and she smiled much like a pale sun on a frosty morning. She did not know that to the vulgar she was known as "Old Guy-face". She district-visited with great assiduity, and with serene impertinence. Working women would say: "Look out—here's Old Guy-face," and they would lock the door on her, for nothing but a locked door would keep Miss Godbold from doing what she conceived to be her duty.

Gurney fled from Miss Godbold as from a large, white maggot. Mrs. Hallard, sitting in the garden of Sea View, saw Gurney slip suddenly through the gate, cross the lawn, and greet her with an apologetic air.

"Excuse me, may I sit down, Miss Godbold——?"

Rose Hallard smiled at him. "Yes, do. Am I—sufficient protection?"

"I sincerely hope so. A most formidable lady. She picks you up by the scruff of the neck. Forgive me, but I am being almost —vulgar."

Miss Godbold had sighted her prey, but by the time she reached the gate of Sea View, Rose, who had become very much

the daughter of her father, had, with a delightful little giggle, staged her tableau. She had found a skein of wool, and there was Mr. Gurney sitting with the skein over his hands, while Mrs. Hallard wound her wool. Almost his attitude was that of homage and devotion.

Miss Godbold paused. So that was the game, was it? This saintly little person was paying court to a wealthy young woman. Strange, how mean are the motives which the devout and the good assign to each other! But Miss Godbold was not to be daunted. She opened the gate and walked in.

Rose Hallard's eyes met Gurney's, and a certain roguishness in them said: "Prepare to receive cavalry."

She turned to smile at Miss Godbold. What a bouncing bundle of a woman was this, hard-boiled egg and soap! She waddled. The flounce of her mannish blue serge coat stuck out like a frill about her high hips.

"Good afternoon, dear Mrs. Hallard. How busy we are!"

Dear Mrs. Hallard indeed! Scrumptious old humbug. Gurney, the little gentleman, rose to his feet, his hands looped together by the swag of wool. He was mute. Much better leave the conversation to the ladies.

"And how are you, Miss Godbold?"

"I am always well, thank you."

"How nice. Please sit down again, Mr. Gurney. We must go on with the good work. Socks, you know. My father likes me to make his socks."

She did not ask Miss Godbold to sit down, nor was there a chair for the lady. Mr. Gurney gave Mrs. Hallard an appealing look. Ought he not to rise and offer his chair? Her firm counter-glance bade him stay put.

"I'm afraid my father is not at home, Miss Godbold. Did you wish to see him?"

Miss Godbold had no wish to see Mr. Slade. She thought him a rather irreverent old gentleman.

"No. Let me relieve you, Mr. Gurney. I'm sure you must feel—a little——"

"Thank you," said Gurney quickly, "I really am quite—comfortable, thank you."

There was silence, while Mrs. Hallard, with serene composure, wound her wool, drawing it from over Gurney's thumbs. Miss Godbold prodded the grass with her stick. Could a woman, even a very self-assertive woman, be more obviously *de trop*?

"Well, I must not hinder the good work. You are making yourself quite useful, aren't you, Mr. Gurney?"

Miss Godbold had a way of breaking out into sudden laughter. It was vulgar and unpleasant laughter, and supremely self-revealing.

"I hope so," said Gurney, with a stiff face.

Mrs. Hallard looked up at the lady as though this neighing sound puzzled her. Trust a woman to let another woman know, without words, that she is behaving in a strange and unfinished way. Mrs. Hallard's eyes said: "Why this unpleasant sound? My sense of humour must not be sufficiently vulgar."

Miss Godbold might be a very complacent person, but she was not such a fool as to miss the meaning of that look. Her face became the jug, and there was sour milk in it.

"I will not trespass upon your——"

"Oh, must you go, Miss Godbold?"

"I have serious duties to perform."

Her glance was at Gurney. Silly little squirrel squatting there nibbling nuts!

"How nice for you. Oh—good-bye."

Miss Godbold waddled to the gate, and Gurney watched her go.

"What a very earnest lady!"

Mrs. Hallard relieved him of the last loop of wool.

"I wonder why good women are——"

She did not complete the question. She raised her eyes to find Gurney looking at her in a particular way. She surprised Mr. Gurney. Almost he blushed. His sudden self-consciousness was rather attractive.

"I can't get the right word."

Gurney appeared to be searching for it, while he gazed at her hands.

"Yes, let me see. Uncomfortable to the eye."

Mrs. Hallard smiled as her father might have smiled. "I did not know you were a connoisseur, Mr. Gurney."

"Of what?" said Gurney, innocently.

"Oh, well, never mind."

Gurney rose slowly to his feet. "I—rather—believe that—the—the nature—of a—wo—person—shows in the face."

"Do you?"

Gurney was looking very grave, as though he had found something very precious, and did not know whether to exhibit it or put it away quickly in his pocket.

"Yes, I do. But, forgive me, like Miss Godbold I have duties to perform."

VII

MISS GODBOLD was moved to turn the sour milk sweet in herself, and she did it by starting a malicious rumour. Did Miss So and So know that the Rev. John Gurney had designs upon a lady with money? Yes, Mr. Gurney was not quite so simple and ingenuous as he seemed. No, really? Miss So and So was shocked and peeved. She was a Gurneyite in her secret romancings. Who could it be? Miss Godbold shook her large head and looked smug and sly. No, she felt that she ought not to tell. How disappointing! Well, if Miss So and So would promise not to repeat the news? Miss So and So did so promise, and promptly passed the rumour on to Mrs. Everybody. It went from ear to ear, after each receiver had given a solemn promise that it would not be repeated.

"But" said one lady, "Mr. Gurney does not approve of divorced persons remarrying. The sanctity of marriage—and all that."

"But how——?"

"I just happen to know. A friend told me. I rather suspect Mr. Gurney of being a ritualist."

"Well, Mrs. Hallard's money might cause him to change his —principles. But how very—cynical."

Apparently, it did not occur to any of the ladies that the report might be untrue.

Nor, "God forgive me", as Gurney put it to his secret self, was it untrue in its deeper meaning, for, to Mr. Egbert Jones's curate Mr. Slade's daughter had suddenly become a figure of mysterious and poignant significance. She was so different from ——And Gurney got down on his knees, and asked to be forgiven for feeling what he should not feel. But how could he help feeling that Rose Hallard was a wonderful and a lovely person. You had but to look at her mouth and eyes. Gurney wanted to look at her mouth and eyes, and listen to her voice, and watch her hands, and know that the thing that had been born in him was good. Well, why should he not cherish this strange new love, hide it in a chalice, and let his adoration shine in some silent sanctuary of its own? Was there sin or shame in such a lovely tenderness? How could there be, provided that he did not betray it.

Gurney was troubled. What of those morning walks with Mr. Slade? Ought he to continue them if he cherished a guilty passion for Mr. Slade's daughter? Oh, dear, how old phrases did turn up, like poor relations! Guilty passion? Could what he felt for Mrs. Hallard be described as such?

Moreover, Gurney was not very comfortable at No. 7, Cashiobury Terrace. It seemed that the Misses Plimsoll, the furniture and the bed had gone hard on him. The little prim house had developed an atmosphere of austere disapproval. Nettles, nettles everywhere, and not a smile on a face! The Misses Plimsoll had heard of Gurney's various activities, actual and otherwise. He could feed a tramp in their front garden. He wore deplorable clothes. He was a revolutionary in his social credo, and yet he could pay court to Mammon.

Said Miss Caroline to Miss Euphemia: "I have doubts about Mr. Gurney's—sincerity. Are we harbouring a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

Poor sheep! Miss Caroline should have said ram. And the fleece that clothed the little opportunist was so very thin.

But the Misses Plimsoll did not approve. They were less sedulous in considering Gurney's comfort. His socks ceased to be mended, and eggs were hard-boiled or premature. Gurney's world was very much the curate's egg.

The Rev. John's passion for the truth led him to do a very significant thing. He could not take his morning walk with Mr. Slade on false pretences, or he might feel that he had sand in his shoes. Why not tell Mr. Slade the truth, not as it concerned his daughter, but in its implications—past and present? Surely, Mr. Slade would be the one person who could understand him, for Mr. Slade had suffered in his own life. So, Gurney took his courage in his hands and displayed his dreadful secret to his friend.

"You have been so kind to me, sir, that I don't wish our friendship to rest—on false foundations."

"Something worrying you, John?"

Mr. Slade spoke the name lovingly, for was it not the name of the friend who had set him free.

"Thank you, for that, sir. I should like to make a confession to you, and to you alone."

Mr. Slade paused. They had reached the western gate of Carpline Gardens, and Mr. Slade turned towards it.

"Come in here. Trees and shrubs don't prick up ears. I think you can trust me."

"I know I can."

Mr. Slade led Gurney to a particular seat, a seat that was secure and associated with many memories, happy and otherwise. He took off his hat, and nursed it, and Gurney sat with his hands clasped between his knees.

"When I was a very young man, sir, I did a most reckless thing. It has haunted me."

So, Gurney told Mr. Slade his secret, and Mr. Slade smiled inwardly as he listened. Was this the dreadful thing that oppressed John Gurney's conscience? How very innocent of him! But Mr. Slade did understand its implications, and more so than Gurney realized. Gurney, as lover and man, had a golden cannon-ball chained to one ankle.

"Well, that's all, sir. I know you will respect my secret. I feel relieved to have told you. I hope you don't think——"

Mr. Slade laid a hand on Gurney's knee. "Thank you, John. I too had a secret. Probably you know it."

Gurney nodded.

"A much more dreadful one than yours, John. Well, I lived it down. I have a feeling that if one lives to the best in one——things somehow come right. Besides, one can't do more."

"No, sir."

"Well, go on being Gurney. And come to supper to-night."

"I don't know, sir—whether—I——"

"Feeling sensitive?"

"False pretences, sir. Well, you see——"

Mr. Slade did see, but he did not say so. The poor lad was in love with his daughter, and was terrified of betraying the secret.

"Well, we'll leave it open, John. Do what you feel like doing. I shall understand."

For a month Gurney did not enter the doorway of Sea View, though he picked up Mr. Slade on most mornings, and walked with him to his shop. Sometimes, they were joined by Mr. Golightly, a Golightly going grey, but as polished and resilient as of old. Mr. Golightly was one of those parishioners who liked the the little curate, for, though Mr. Golightly was the people's warden at St. Jude's, he had discovered in the Rev. Egbert Jones certain prejudices. Mr. Jones was affable to Mr. Golightly in the vestry, but under God's own sky he seemed to remember that Mr. Golightly was a draper.

"And so I am, and be dashed to them," said Mr. Golightly to his wife. "It's men like me who keep the Church and the

Country going, and I'm not good enough to dine with him. Damn it, if that's Christianity, I'd have done better under Nero."

Mrs. Golightly was a very comfortable woman. She praised her husband and did not reprove him. After all, she had been very happy with Mr. Golightly.

"Mr. Chatterway was different. And after all, my dear, you have done much more for Southfleet than Mr. Jones has."

Mr. Golightly shot his cuffs. "Well, that's true, Mabel, old girl. Didn't I give a ward to the cottage hospital, and get the new sports ground going? Old Jones is a snob. Damn it, I prefer the curate."

For, Gurney was quite happy to sit at Mr. Golightly's supper table, and be smiled upon and pressed to take second helpings by that motherly person Mr. Golightly's wife. Gurney might have the reputation of being a little advanced in his views upon sociology, but he wasn't a snob, and he listened with grave interest to Mr. Golightly's conversation. For, was not Mr. Golightly a self-made man, a study in worldly success, and yet generous and kindly, if somewhat full of reminiscences.

Gurney was sensitive, and the sensitive suffer from feelings about their fellows, especially so about those obtuse souls who go bumping along life's pathways and with innocent egoism edge the less stupid into the gutter. Gurney worried about problems that would have been mere swan's-down or gossamer to the vulgar. If, as the mystics say, each soul and body has its aura and that with the "sensitive" that mysterious, spiritual nimbus is of much greater compass in those of fine and delicate texture, then Gurney's aura might be measured in yards in contrast to the coarser mortal's inches. Also, it was blue, and a very delicate blue.

Said Mrs. Hallard to her father: "Have we—offended Mr. Gurney in any way?"

Mr. Slade was peeling an apple. "No my dear, I think not. Gurney is a man of rather fine feelings."

"I'm glad. He hasn't been here for a long time."

"Reasons, Rose, known only to Gurney."

"And—you?"

"And me, but that is a trust."

Mrs. Hallard watched her father's clean and deliberate old hands dealing with the apple. How few people had a touch like his.

"I'm glad. I have a feeling that Mr. Gurney has had some unhappy——"

Mr. Slade smiled at the apple. "Eve in the garden, what!—I'm not saying anything."

"I don't want you to. I suppose that if one has suffered in one's own life——"

"Yes, my dear. One is blessed with compassion and understanding, or should be. What foul nonsense——!"

"Nonsense?"

"Yes, that everything should be made safe and easy and luscious for humanity. By Jove, this is about the best apple I have grown! Without struggle and suffering and those poignant things that stir the soul, man is no more than an unlicked cub."

Mr. Slade was munching his apple with evident relish.

"Poor Mr. Gurney's apple was sour."

"Oh, Eve, Eve! If all apples were sweet, my dear, where would the contrasts be? Sour apples and tummy pains are educative to youth."

Did Gurney in his stall on Sundays turn his eyes towards the Slade pew? He did so turn them. And in the pulpit he was conscious of a particular face, a serene and listening face that seemed more luminous than any other. Gurney, when he preached, tried to become unconscious of individual faces, for a collection of normal English faces does not encourage inspiration. As a well-known humorist has confessed, his urge often was to shout: "Smile, damn you, smile! Don't sit there like a lot of supercilious corpses!" But there were certain faces to whom Gurney could speak, for his preaching was more conversational than rhetorical, and his vicar thought it poor stuff. There was no erudition in Gurney's sermons. He was rather like a child talking to children.

Yes, he could talk to those faces, Mrs. Richmond's, and Dr. Richmond's, and Mr. Slade's and Mrs. Hallard's, and even to Mr. Golightly's. They were live, sincere, comprehending faces. Then, of course, there was Mr. Sawkins's face, rather like a mangy old dog's, suspicious and watchful, as though Gurney was proposing to give away his bone. And Miss Godbold's, like a bladder of lard, and Mr. Egbert Jones's critical and patronizing. There were certain faces which Gurney did not wish to see. But those other faces. That particular face, so exquisite and gentle.

One Sunday Gurney found himself preaching upon Love, Divine Love. He was being quite eloquent, until his eyes happened upon that particular face. Dear God, was he speaking to her? And would she suspect? Gurney became suddenly self-conscious and face-shy. Everybody seemed to be staring at him. He began to fumble with his words, even to stutter. He paused, looked at the roof, recovered himself, and continued, but with a more sacerdotal formality. He was conscious of flurry. He wanted to get out of the pulpit. In fact he brought the discourse to a somewhat abrupt conclusion.

"And now—to God the Father——"

Mr. Slade and his daughter walked home together, alone.

"Did you notice?" said she.

"What, my dear?"

"Mr. Gurney nearly broke down."

"Did he?"

"Didn't you——?"

Mr. Slade prevaricated. In fact, he had put two and two together, Gurney's eyes fixed upon a particular point, and then—that sudden embarrassment. And Mr. Slade had wondered.

"Perhaps he saw Medusa."

"Who?"

"Oh, Miss Godbold, or Mr. Sawkins. There are faces, my dear, that almost make one want to spit."

Master George Hallard was home for the holidays, and Master

George had discovered a thing of which Southfleet was ignorant. George was a cricket enthusiast; he kept the cards of all the county fixtures and filled in the results, and knew the names of all the celebrities. Mr. Slade, gently consenting, allowed George to possess a cricket-pitch on one of the lawns, with a practice net to give some protection to the vegetation. George, aged ten, was not yet much of a swiper, but he was dreaming of the days when he might hit a ball over the old school cloisters.

The business was to find a bowler, for Mr. Slade could only trundle balls underhand, and that was how George and Gurney had become such cronies. It had begun on the cliff, with George defending a poplar tree with a new birthday bat, and Gurney trundling a compo ball to him. Gurney could bowl breaks from the on and from the off, and cunning sneakers that looked innocent and were sly. He had put George out twice in an over, though George was learning to hold a straight bat.

"I say, sir, you do send them in."

"I used to play a bit at one time."

"Your turn now, sir."

Gurney had taken the bat, and George's first ball had tempted him. He had caught it full and fair, and seen it bounce on the roadway, and just miss a couple of old ladies on the further path.

"Gosh," said George, "that was a snorter," and he had set off to recover the ball. But Gurney had been shocked and contrite. He had dropped the bat, and trotted off to apologize to the ladies.

"I am so very sorry. I am afraid I startled you. I did not mean to hit so hard."

The old ladies had appeared to enjoy the incident.

"Why, Mr. Gurney, you are quite a cricketer."

He was, or had been. J. Gurney had been his school's star-turn, and he had played on occasions for the Surrey Colts. There was more wiriness and wiliness in Gurney than appeared.

Now, Master George was at home again, and stumps and net were up, and Mr. Slade had given his grandson a real leather ball. "Now, don't hit it too hard, George. Balls cost money."

"But they are made to be hit, Grandpa." George was ambitious. He might be in a very lowly position at school, but there was no reason why he should not play for the third eleven, especially with coaching from Mr. Gurney. George went in pursuit of his friend, only to find Mr. Gurney very elusive.

"Hallo, George. Had a good term?"

Gurney always appeared to be in a hurry, and busy about something, and George was baulked and puzzled. Gurney smiled at you just as of old, but he had an awful lot of duties to perform, and wretched people to visit, and every evening he seemed to be preparing a sermon. George did not attach much importance to Mr. Gurney's sermons, but he had great respect for Mr. Gurney's bowling arm.

George complained to his grandfather. "Mr. Gurney seems awful busy."

"He is, my dear."

"He doesn't seem to have time to play cricket."

Gurney had deprived himself during the holidays of his morning parade with Mr. Slade. In cherishing his secret, though he was compelled to avoid the boy, such seeming churlishness hurt him. But a solution offered itself. Gurney had started a Men and Boys' Cricket Club, and the new Sports Ground was available, and Gurney smote his forehead. "You silly ass, why didn't you think of that before?"

Gurney turned up one morning in time to catch Mr. Slade.

"George in, sir?"

"Yes, still busy with the jam jar, I think."

"Could I speak to him?"

Mr. Slade turned back, and hailed his grandson through the window.

"George, Mr. Gurney wants you."

George abandoned the jam pot, and was out like a flash. Gurney was waiting at the gate.

"Hallo, George. I'm not quite so busy now. If you come up to the new Sports Ground after tea, we'll have a little practice."

George's face was that of a cherub. "I say, sir, it's awfully—— Yes, I'll be there."

"Good. I'll bowl you leg-breaks."

So, George and Gurney enjoyed themselves, with others, for Gurney had other lads to coach, and was putting in practice himself as a new member of the Southfleet eleven. George would go home to his mother, with his little freckled face aglow.

"He only bowled me once in three overs."

What an innocent business, yet certain of the Southfleet snoopers asserted that Mr. Gurney was courting the mother through the son.

VIII

MR. SLADE and his daughter sat in the shade of the marquee, for the day was a scorcher. Mrs. Hallard was in white, and her father wore a grey lounge suit and a Panama hat. The Gentlemen of Southfleet, rather a scratch lot, were playing an officers' eleven from Shoreness, and though Gurney had taken three wickets for seventeen runs, the soldiers had knocked up a score of 153, and five of the Southfleet Gentlemen were out for 61. Mrs. Richmond had come to sit beside Mr. Slade and his daughter, to watch Charles joined at the wicket by Mr. Gurney. Charles was a swiper, and he had been lucky, for the out-field had missed two catches. Gurney looked like a boy going out to do battle with grown men. His flannels were somewhat yellow, and his trousers rather short in the leg, and he wore a black cap with the peak pulled well down over his nose.

Mr. Slade heard a titter behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Mrs. Jones adjusting her pince-nez, and showing a splendour of yellow teeth.

"Really how odd! Shrunk in the wash, I presume."

The Rev. Egbert was beside her, bland and complacent, and Mr. Slade sniffed.

"A bit yellow, I admit," he thought, "but no yellower than the lady's teeth. Well, wait and see."

Said the voice: "I did not know he played any games."

The vicar boomed: "David and Goliath. I am afraid we are a defeated side."

Mr. Slade nudged his daughter and winked at her.

"Like to bet on our winning, Rose?"

Mrs. Jones turned her pince-nez upon him. What could an old shop-keeper know about cricket?

Gurney took his place at the wicket, was given centre, and waited for the visitors' fast bowler to attack him. Gurney's pads looked too large for him, which they were, being Club equipment. He had a rather peculiar stance; he crouched, left elbow forward, bat straight, and his attitude appeared to amuse Mr. Jones. What an odd little figure! Gurney's first minute was not impressive. The fast bowler had been dealing out death and destruction, and Gurney played him with respect while he got his eye in. He stone-walled, and stone-walling can be dull for the spectators. Two overs passed, and Charles hit a boundary, but Gurney had not snicked or sliced a single run.

"Poor little man," said the vicaress. "He seems quite afraid to hit anything."

"Ha, wait, madam!" thought Mr. Slade, "don't show your teeth too soon. And I do wish you would keep your mouth shut. Toad-in-the-hole, what!"

Charles hit another snorter, and it appeared to rouse Gurney to emulation, but he had not yet warmed up to the smiting stage. He had a quick eye and a cunning bat, he began to snick and hook for ones and twos, responding to Charles's shout of: "Run, sir." Gurney ran like a hare, in spite of those enormous pads. The austere life he led kept him extraordinarily fit.

The score mounted steadily, and the bowling was changed. Gurney seemed to like the fast fellow, and was snicking him and cutting him. The soldiers tried their "Googly". Now, Mr. Gurney himself was a "Googly" and knew all about the tricks. He waited for the ball that suited him and hit. The ball came

bounding into the marquee, and had the impertinence to end its career in Mrs. Jones's lap.

"How's that, madam?" chirped Mr. Slade.

Mrs. Richmond laughed. She had a very delightful laugh, but it did not appeal to the vicaress.

With Gurney and Charles both well set and knocking the bowling about the score reached its 100. Fifty-three to go, and four wickets to fall. Mr. Slade became aware of someone fidgeting in his proximity and he traced this restlessness to Rev. Egbert Jones. Mr. Jones was sitting with a set smirk on his face; he kept tilting his chair, and Mr. Slade became wise as to the reason for this restlessness. Mr. Jones was not pleased. He was jealous of Gurney's prowess.

When the score had reached 120, Charles was caught in the out-field. He had made 43 runs, and he came in looking hot and happy. He smiled at his mother, and took off his cap to Rose Hallard. Mr. and Mrs. Jones he did not seem to see.

"Well played, Charles," said Mr. Slade.

"Gurney's great, isn't he? We may pull it off."

Mr. and Mrs. Jones looked glum.

But they did not pull it off. The last batsmen were rabbits, and though Gurney knocked up another thirteen and carried his bat, the soldiers won by eleven runs. They were pleased with the win, and they seemed equally pleased with the padre. It had been a great game, and a sporting game. Gurney walked in triumph to the marquee, with the opposing captain and the fast-bowler on either side of him. They were big men, and they made Gurney look like a boy, but he was not small in spirit.

"Well played, padre."

The spectators applauded Mr. Gurney. It had been a gallant effort, and a source of surprise to Southfleet. Mrs. Hallard was smiling at him, and there was more in her smile than met the eye. The Rev. John could shine among other men. Mr. Jones was standing up and solemnly clapping his hands, but without making much sound. His wife was squinting, which she did when certain negative emotions stirred in her.

"Well played, Gurney," boomed the vicar, "I did not know you had it in you."

Mr. Slade sniffed.

"Sour grapes, you pompous ass!"

The Rev. John Gurney's fifty-three runs caused his credit to rise several degrees on Southfleet's social thermometer. Damn it, the little parson was hot stuff with the bat! And cricket is cricket in England. Dr. Richmond pulled up his new car to congratulate him. Mr. Sawkins was peeved. How could a fellow be an out and out Radical and yet play cricket? Mr. Robert Smiles had to have his sneer, but Mr. Smiles would have funked fast bowling.

"Quite the flannelled toff, ain't he! Knocking a ball about with a lot of gents, with people starving."

A fellow workman retorted upon Mr. Smiles. "Yes, and don't you wish you could do it."

"Me? I've got other things to——"

"Go it, old Snarly. The little man's got guts."

Was it the halo with which his prowess on the cricket-field had hallowed him, or was it the halo about another head that inspired the Rev. John Gurney to be a little more bold in his sermons? If he was hot stuff on the cricket pitch should he not be more ardent in the pulpit? Not that he intended to preach that particular sermon, at least—not yet. When he had knocked up a hundred for Southfleet, he might dare to do such a thing? None the less, there was more audacity in Gurney's sermons, and a part of the congregation responded to them. Whatever the cynics may say humanity responds to an ideal when it is sponsored by a man whose faith and courage are beyond reproach. The young were with Gurney; he carried a torch, not a bottle of pasteurised milk Some of the old too were with him, Mr. Slade and those who had acquired gentleness and a benign smile. Mr. Sawkins sat as though he could have snorted The Rev. Egbert listened with a hand shading his face, and a complacency that was disturbed. He fidgeted; he frowned, for even

Mr. Jones could divine upon many of those faces a rapt attentiveness that was apt to be lacking when he orated.

"I think I shall have to speak to Gurney. He is getting too emotional."

Emily agreed with him.

"Bad taste. We don't want—er—chapel—atmosphere."

"Indeed we do not. I have always contemned revivalist methods. Hysteria in the pulpit is bad for a congregation."

Mr. Jones put out feelers among his fellows, but the response was not as sympathetic as he expected. Mr. Jones had no way with him; he was not welcomed at bedsides and at back doors; he talked down, not on the level. He had no sympathy for sin, and Gurney did not call it sin. It was frailty in the flesh, from which all mortals suffered. The Rev. Egbert had never made a splendid ass of himself; his daily carrot was just a carrot. And he had never knocked up a century at cricket.

It was after the preaching of a particular sermon that the wonderful thing happened to Gurney. He had been visiting a sick man in the Old Town, none other than old Rawlins, the Socrates of Southfleet pier, and he turned into Caroline Gardens to sit and meditate for a moment upon the refreshing frankness of Samuel Rawlins. Old Rawlins was veritable Kipling, and Gurney read his Kipling. But on the particular seat he surprised a particular person, and in panic he might have passed her by had she not risen.

"Oh, Mr. Gurney, you are the very man I wanted to see."

Good Heavens, how could that be so? Gurney, standing bareheaded, realized that she too was standing.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Hallard."

She smiled and humoured him, but Gurney did not sit.

"It is about my Eliza. She is laid up with rheumatism and a heart. She would so like you to come and see her."

Almost, Gurney blushed. If Eliza had a heart, so had he.

"With pleasure. But ought it not to be Mr. Jones?"

"You are Eliza's choice, Mr. Gurney, and it is a free country."

There was a pause, and then she said: "You see, you have

something to give to us all—like—the—the—humanity—in your last sermon."

Then, a sudden shyness seemed to fall upon them. Gurney stood holding his hat, and feeling like a knight who had been crowned with flowers by his lady. So, she had liked that sermon. He was the chosen of her cook. And she was there on the seat, with a strange sheen in her eyes, complete for him in all her loveliness.

Gurney moistened his lips, and looked at her hands.

"That is very—kind of you. I—I try to speak—what is in me."

She looked up at his shy face.

"Yes—what is in us, Mr. Gurney."

And suddenly he became formal. "What would be the most convenient hour, Mrs. Hallard, for me to visit—Eliza?"

"Any time that suits you. I know your day is very full."

So was Gurney's heart. He gave her a little, self-conscious bow, hesitated, put on his hat.

"I am always—your—devoted servant."

Devoted? Oh dear, had he said too much? He gave a jerk to his hat, and fled.

Rose remained on the seat. There was laughter in her eyes, but it was loving laughter. Gurney feared no fast bowler, but he seemed to fear her face. Always, your devoted servant! Now, what was John Gurney's secret? Was all this sensitive self-effacement due to that secret, or was it the shyness of a romantic boy? Her father knew, but she knew enough of her father to realize that when he was trusted with a secret he kept it. She sat serenely sunning herself in her meditations. Gurney was no boy, and she was a mature woman. She was wise as to many things, life's contrasts, the profound differences between things and people. She had come to know her values, as Lucy Richmond knew them, and to compare the sensual selfishness of the man she had married and discarded with the clean selflessness and simple courage of a John Gurney. Hector Hallard was dead. It was reported that he had died of drink in Rio. She had not

grieved greatly; she would have found grief had she discovered in the son anything of the father. Yes, no doubt Hector would have looked down with superciliousness on Gurney, while she, somehow, was looking up at him, though she was an inch taller than he was. How utterly good it was when you could trust a man, and feel that if you gave him your faith and affection they would be safe from treachery and disaster.

Gurney was back at Cashiobury Terrace, profoundly moved, and almost as profoundly disturbed. Had he really said to her, "I am always your devoted servant?" He had. And had she thought it impertinence? Well—— Mr. Gurney's dinner was ready for him, but he had other food to feed upon. Boiled mutton and caper sauce! No, he could not confront boiled mutton. But how to explain this abstinence to the Misses Plimsoll? They might feel hurt, and Gurney had a horror of hurting people, unless he deemed it to be his duty to do so. He rang the bell, and apologized to Miss Caroline.

"I am so sorry. I—I have indigestion. I don't want to waste your excellent food, Miss Plimsoll, but I think I will refrain today."

Miss Caroline was quite nice about it. She said: "Try a 'Beecham'."

Both Rose and Gurney may have over-simplified their values and their feelings, but those were the days before Freud, and it had not become fashionable to peer into the imagined and dark recesses of the self and discover slime and strange creatures there. We speak of Victorian repression, but may not a part of it have been the self-discipline of people who believed in something. People who believe in nothing have every incentive for putting both feet in the trough. Gurney was Gurney, the year One, A.D. In his spiritual make-up he was timeless, a man who divined in himself the mysterious presence of God.

Meanwhile Eliza waited for him, the good and loyal and sometimes difficult Eliza. She had grown even more outspoken in growing grey. No, she did not want a pomposity like the Rev. Egbert Jones sitting beside her bed and making solemn and sen-

tentious noises. She wanted a man to whom she could talk, and simpler Southfleet could talk to Gurney.

Gurney rang the bell, and waited, trying to appear the devoted servant on the doorstep. Would he be confronted with—her? He was not. Rachel, the parlour-maid, admitted him.

"I have come to see Eliza."

"Yes, sir. Please step in."

Gurney found Eliza in her neat back bedroom, with its view of the garden, sitting propped up in bed, with a Bible on her knees. Eliza took her religion, like her cooking, very seriously, and she was apt to be short-tempered when she could not cook, especially those jam-rolls and treacle-tarts which Mr. Slade loved.

"I do hate being a noosance."

Gurney sat and smiled at her. "Yes, it is a nuisance, isn't it, Eliza, when you can't do the things you want to do? But I'm sure it is not you who are the nuisance. I have heard of your cooking."

"Have you—now, sir?"

"What's more I have enjoyed it, haven't I? I remember a suet roll with raisins and treacle sauce."

"Now, fancy you remembering that, sir. Mr. Slade does love a bit of good suet."

"Yes, and it depends upon what we make of it. I have a feeling that God respects good cooking."

Eliza sighed and looked out of the window, and Gurney, looking in the same direction, saw what she saw. Mr. Slade, as a gardener, was moving with the times and had become a disciple of Miss Jekyll, and he was deep in a new border, tying up Helenium and Michaelmas Daisies. Mr. Slade was in his shirt-sleeves, and wearing his Panama hat, and at the moment he was helping his hands by carrying a hank of twine between his teeth.

Eliza gazed at him as though she could never be quite happy unless she was cooking for Mr. Slade.

"He does love 'is garden, bless 'im."

Gurney watched the serene old figure. "And—I think, Eliza, everybody loves him."

Eliza closed her eyes, and let her head go back on the pillow. "A wonderful life 'e's led, sir. What I call a sort of sermon in trousers."

Gurney gave a quick lift of the head. "That's really very apt, Eliza. Quite a remarkable phrase. I must remember it."

Eliza opened her eyes at him. She was sure that Mr. Gurney was quite a remarkable person.

"Yes, he's 'appy, and he deserves to be, sir. I do wish that before he goes 'e could see Mrs. Rose suited with a proper man. Her first, 'e was a rotten bad lot."

Gurney looked out of the window. "But perhaps Mrs. Hallard is content as she is."

Eliza looked at Mr. Gurney. "No woman is, sir, until the right man comes along. That's my opinion."

Gurney was mute, but the inner woman in Eliza was eloquent. Eliza had made a discovery. Mr. Gurney was the very man for Mr. Slade's daughter, but Eliza did not say so.

IX

WAS it love, or the madness thereof that persuaded John Gurney to preach that particular sermon? It was the address he had submitted to Mr. Slade, but in some measure Gurney had modified it, not because he had watered down his principles, but out of a new tenderness for the world of men. There was no Hell Fire and Brimstone in Gurney. His creed was founded on compassion, and on a more subtle understanding of the urges that activate humanity. Mr. Slade's shrewd wisdom and his acceptance of the realities had helped to clarify Gurney's credo, and he too could feel disgust for sentimental humbug, especially the humbug indulged in by self-interested reformers.

Gurney did speak of the Mammon of Unrighteousness, but in dealing with it he followed the example of Dr. Samuel Smiles. He asserted that the making of money was no sin, provided that money was used in a wise and Christian way. It was the lust for gold, and the worshipping of it that tainted the economic scheme. Men were of varying value in the community, and there was no injustice in the recognition of special talent and character. Struggle and effort, patience and self-restraint were good for the soul, provided that in the process man remembered that all good things came from God.

It was an eloquent sermon, a sweetly reasonable sermon, and it caused some faces to light up, others to grow sullen. Gurney might be preaching to the lover in himself, and to that beloved face, but there were other members of the congregation who wanted to misunderstand him. Prejudice looks only one way, and the way that it chooses. Preach Christ Crucified, and there are men who will crucify you.

The Rev. Egbert Jones, shading his face with a hand, listened and was offended. Really, Gurney was going too far. This was rank Radicalism, demagogy, a most unseemly lapse from good taste. Mr. Jones grew restless. Was he jealous of his curate? Oh no, of course not. He was sincere in deploring Gurney's bad taste, this Nonconformist ranting. Mr. Jones peered through his fingers, and was unpleasantly moved to suspect that a part of the congregation liked this stuff. Faces were so significant, and some of those interested and applauding faces belonged to parishioners who mattered, Dr. Richmond and his wife, Mr. Golightly, old Slade, and old Slade's daughter. Well, of course, old Slade would suck up such stuff. It was part of the pose of the reformed offender.

"I must really talk to Gurney. I can't have hysteria in my pulpit."

Mr. Sawkins sat and glowered, but Gurney did not see Mr. Sawkins. Why should he? Mr. Sawkins was a scruffy old dog who had grown old in the wrong way. He was unclean in person and in mind. Mr. Sawkins loved money as he

loved himself, and Gurney's sermon sounded like a personal insult.

"Damn the fellow. I believe he is preaching at me!"

In brief, the cap fitted Mr. Sawkins so neatly that he was moved to wait for Mr. Gurney and have it out with him. He waited outside the porch, only to find that he was one of a group, and that he did not belong to it. Mr. Slade was there. Of course, Slade would be there.

Mr. Slade saw that Mr. Sawkins was in a pet, and it made him mischievous.

"Morning, Mr. Sawkins."

"Morning," grunted the other.

"Wonderful morning, almost as good as the sermon."

Mr. Sawkins looked like chewing his beard. "I beg to differ, Slade."

"What, don't you like the morning?"

Mr. Sawkins glowered at him. Facetious old fool!

Then, Gurney appeared, carrying with him into the sunlight a rather white, stiff face. He tried to smile, and the smile was brittle ice. There had been words in a corner of the vestry and within hearing of the choir. Mr. Jones had, with an immense solemnity, and the suggestion of a duty unwillingly preformed, reproved Gurney, and Gurney had shown temper.

"I shall be glad if you will call on me, Gurney, after evensong I wish to discuss—what you have just said."

Gurney had been slipping off his surplice.

"I'm sorry, sir. What is in me must out."

"Ah, yes, Gurney, exactly; what is in you."

"You mean, sir——?"

"We can only give what we have, and if that something is —not—of the——"

"I stand by what I said, sir."

"Ah, you do! May I remind you that the Church of England has a tradition, and that my church is not a Little Bethel."

Gurney had recovered his temper, hung up his surplice and left the vestry, and here, in the sunlight, he saw the faces of

friends, Mr. Sawkins might be there, but Gurney did not think that Mr. Sawkins mattered.

"Well, John, you gave us an excellent sermon."

"I'm glad you liked it, Mr. Slade."

Gurney dared to glance at another face. It smiled at him and nodded. "I—too." And she, at the age of thirty, was supposed to be the most wealthy woman in Southfleet. Well, if she had not quarrelled with his discourse upon the peril of riches, need he worry? Worry? Dear God, he had not fully realized his position. Even if he had been free, how could a penurious little curate have paid court to Mr. Slade's daughter without causing the vulgar world to mock. "Do as I say, but not as I do!" Yes, and such a romance might have been misunderstood even by some of these who listened to him.

He felt someone take his arm. It was Mr. Slade.

"I am going to look at—my—grave, John. Come with me."

"Your—grave, sir?"

"Yes."

Said Mr. Slade's daughter: "I must go, and help Rachel. Eliza is not up, yet."

Gurney raised his hat to Mrs. Hallard, and was led away by Mr. Slade. Mr. Sawkins, baffled, followed Mrs. Hallard. He overtook her. He raised his hat and presented her with the Sawkins's smile.

"May I ask, ma'am, if you liked that sermon?"

"I did."

"Well, all I can say is that it was very—broad-minded of you. I am afraid I am more prejudiced."

"Are you, Mr. Sawkins?"

"So, you don't object to your property being disposed of in the pulpit?"

"It wasn't quite that, was it?"

"That's how I read it. Of course, fellows without a penny are always ready to give away other people's pounds."

Rose smiled quite sweetly. "Some—fellows, Mr. Sawkins. I'm afraid I must hurry on," and she shed him.

Mr. Slade and Gurney had arrived at Mr. Truslove's grave. There were fresh flowers here, flowers from Mr. Slade's garden. He was still holding Gurney's arm.

"So, you have done it, John."

"Done it, sir?"

"Preached that sermon."

"Yes, but not quite—as——"

"No, not quite, but I think you have crossed your Rubicon. You will be able to distinguish the sheep from the goats."

Mr. Slade had removed his hat, and Gurney did likewise. Mr. Slade let go of Gurney's arm, and bent down to make some rearrangement of the flowers.

"Here lies John Truslove, Gentleman. You and he would have got on well together. Both of you Johns, too."

"Was Mr. Truslove a great friend of yours, sir?"

"He gave me my chance and my freedom. What every man should have, though not all can take their chances."

"But they should have that chance."

"Of course."

Gurney's interview with his vicar proved less fearsome than he had feared. In fact, Mr. Egbert Jones made Mr. Gurney what he considered to be an apology, for Mr. Jones was not without discretion. He said that in the heat of the moment he might have spoken more strongly than he had intended, and that Gurney must try to forgive him his affection for the high traditions of the Church. Gurney was ready to accept sweet reasonableness, and was reassured by it. He said that he had done nothing but serve his *Imitatio Christi*, and the Sermon on The Mount.

"Quite, quite, my dear Gurney, but one has to remember that some people have delicate stomachs. Adapt—the food—to the parishioner. Too much red meat—may—produce an attack of spiritual dyspepsia."

Gurney smiled and nodded. "Consider the frailties and prejudices of man, sir?"

"Exactly, Gurney, exactly."

But had John Gurney overheard the conversation that had passed between Egbert and Emily across the Sunday dinner-table, he might have questioned Mr. Jones's sincerity. Mrs. Jones was not without worldly shrewdness. Any schism in the parish would be deplorable. They had to face the fact that Gurney had a certain following in the congregation. No, and Mrs. Jones helped herself to more mint sauce, if Gurney was proving an incubus, and Egbert proposed to get rid of him, would it not be wiser to wait for some more flagrant lapse? Such a lapse was not impossible. It might provide adequate evidence to persuade people that Gurney was not a suitable person for such a parish as St. Jude's. In fact, Mrs. Jones might have said: "Give him sufficient rope to hang himself," but she did not cultivate such candour.

So much for the Rev. Egbert and his Emily, but Gurney was not to escape unscathed from public controversy. Mr. Sawkins had not had his bite, and was sore about it, and he was a persistent person, a true product of the Inland Revenue. He aired his opinions among his cronies at the club, and it was agreed between them that this little parson needed chastening.

Moreover, Mr. Sawkins, and men who were much more reasonable and right than he was, had a case. The world was entering upon one of those storm periods when Emperors and engine-drivers seem to share a grievance, and to be blown up with the wind of unrest. Were not the Germans rattling the sword and building battleships, and in England the *Dreadnought* had been born. There was trouble in the country, too much trouble according to the conservatively-minded. Agitators were abroad. Industry growled and creaked. Life appeared to be approaching one of those cosmic cycles of storm and change which are inevitable, but which shock the cautious.

And here was a little chit like Gurney putting his small spoon in the pot and helping to stir it. Of course, Mr. Jones was a very sound man, but he could be too smooth and easy. If Mr. Jones

could not keep his curate in order, then someone ought to try and do it for him.

"I'll tackle the fellow," said Mr. Sawkins.

That he was quite the wrong sort of fellow to do such a thing was not apparent to his club cronies.

The encounter took place in Caroline Terrace, immediately opposite Mr. Sawkins's hotel. He had been waiting for his man, and coincidence and Gurney obliged him. Mr. Sawkins was sitting in one of the balconies when he saw Gurney approaching. Gurney stopped to speak to a nursemaid, and to make friendly noises to the baby in the pram, and Mr. Sawkins dashed for his hat and went forth to give battle.

"Morning, Gurney. May I have a word with you?"

The Rev. John Gurney was bending over the pram, and snapping his fingers at a smiling infant. The nursemaid's gaze was benign. Gurney was known to most of the Southfleet nursemaids.

"A gentleman wants to speak to you, sir."

Gurney's head emerged from under the pram hood.

"So I see."

Neither of them had spoken in irony, but Mr. Sawkins took it as such. He was like a man with a sore corn, and inevitably it would be trodden on.

"Good morning, Mr. Sawkins. What can I do for you?"

Mr. Sawkins, with an ominous face, pointed to the gate of Caroline Gardens.

"Better come in here. You won't like what I'm going to say."

"Shan't I, Mr. Sawkins?"

"No, you won't."

Gurney looked him in the face and smiled. "Then why should I listen. Is it that you have an unpleasant duty to perform?"

More irony! Such a duty was not unpleasant to Mr. Sawkins.

"Well, you had better hear it, young man. It is for your own good."

"Why are unpleasant things always good—for the other fellow?"

Gurney was having the best of it, yes, distinctly so, but he walked with Mr. Sawkins into the gardens.

"Is this sufficiently private for you, sir?"

"Anybody can hear what I've got to say."

"Then, say it, Mr. Sawkins. By all means say it."

Mr. Sawkins glared, and drew a deep breath.

"There are members of the congregation, Gurney, who take exception to the subversive doctrines you are spreading."

This was quite good for Mr. Sawkins, but it did not remove the smile from Gurney's face.

"What doctrines? Have I been guilty of heresy?"

"You're upsetting people, giving the lower orders wrong notions."

"Would you define the lower orders for me, Mr. Sawkins."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I? I take it you do not include yourself. But, surely, according to our creed, all men are equal before God."

"Humbug!"

"Wait one moment. I did not say that they were equal in capacity or in social value. They are equal as human souls—to whom one should accord——"

"Say it straight out. You're a Communist."

This was a dreadful word, and somewhat novel, but it left Gurney smiling.

"Yes, Mr. Sawkins, in spiritual matters I suppose I am a Communist, but in worldly matters I am—well, what am I? Are men all of the same worth—in their contributions to society? No, they are not. I can follow two lines—the Sermon on the Mount, and that saying of our Lord's, 'Render unto Cæsar——'"

This should have satisfied Mr. Sawkins, for it was a very fair exposition of the case, but when an old dog is in a bad humour and wants to growl, he may go on growling even if you offer him a bone. Besides, the bone may not be the genuine article, or poisoned.

"That's not what you said on Sunday."

"I say it now, sir."

"Yes, when you are cornered."

Gurney was going white about the lips, but he continued to smile.

"No, not exactly cornered, sir, and I will go as far as to say that fools will always be fools, and that sheep will always need a sheep-dog and a shepherd. Nor can you make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Sawkins, "are you being personal?"

"That is for you to judge, sir. If you feel like a sow's ear, well —perhaps——"

Mr. Slade would have loved this naughtiness, but Mr. Sawkins, who had been waiting to be insulted, seized the offence.

"Young man, I have attended St. Jude's Church for nearly twelve years, and if you think that a man of my age and position is going to be insulted by a pup of a subordinate——"

"Then it is the sow's ear, sir. I say no more."

"I should think not, indeed. I shall see the vicar about this."

"By all means do so, Mr. Sowkins."

"Sir!"

But, Gurney, having been tempted by that wicked interchange of vowels, felt contrite, and apologized.

"No, I should not have said that, sir."

Mr. Sawkins was not to be mollified. "You may live to regret it, young man."

Mr. Sawkins did take his grievance to the Rev. Egbert Jones, but Mr. Sawkins was the parish complainer, and in his heart of hearts Mr. Jones loathed him. Moreover, Mr. Jones was offended by Mr. Sawkins's suggestion that he could not control his own curate, and in his own bland way Mr. Jones was almost as rude to Mr. Sawkins as Gurney had been. They parted in a state of heat.

None the less, Gurney had made an enemy, and one who boasted that he belonged to the bull-dog breed, whatever that may mean. In Mr. Sawkins's case it did not postulate pride of purpose, but a malice that endured and waited and watched for

its opportunity. Old men, having ceased to be interesting to women, may grudge the young that privilege, or take pleasure in playing the good uncle to romantic youth. Mr. Sawkins was no good uncle. He had been nastily sensual in secret, and maybe this baulked lust had helped to sour him, for Mr. Sawkins had been a very unsuccessful Don Juan. There are some men whom no woman can stomach.

Gurney confessed his naughtiness to Mr. Slade, and Mr. Slade rubbed the seat of his trousers with one hand, and chuckled.

"You called him Sowkins!"

"I did, sir, much to my regret, but——"

"No buts, John, no buts; an excellent kick applied to—— Well, well, you hit Sowkins for six. But, mind you, he won't forget it. Old dogs can wait for their bite."

"I fail to see, sir, how he can get it."

Which assurance was terribly misplaced, though Gurney could not be expected to foresee a disastrous complex of coincidences. Mr. Slade, still chuckling, and not yet forgetful of the flavour of Mr. Sawkins's footgear, passed the story to his daughter.

"Did he really call Mr. Sawkins—Sowkins?"

"I take John to be a truthful person."

"How lovely!"

And Rose Hallard's opinion of Gurney took on a new appreciation and flavour, which goes to show that wit and even rude wit, can provide a laughing garland.

X

THE Misses Plimsoll, to whom the habits of their lodger were as familiar as the condition of his under-garments, noticed that Mr. Gurney disappeared regularly for a whole day, about once a month. They gathered that he spent the day in London, visiting friends, but on one occasion, when investigating the

pockets of Gurney's spare trousers, for the Misses Plimsoll considered it a duty to attend to the linings of pockets, Miss Euphemia discovered a most surprising and enlightening object, the halves of two tickets that had been used at a notorious music-hall. There had been two tickets, mark you, and Miss Euphemia did not miss the point.

She showed them to her sister. "Look what I've found."

"Well—I never!" said Miss Caroline.

"The Empire—too!"

"A disgraceful place!"

Now, how did Miss Caroline know that?

"Two tickets!"

"Then he must have taken somebody."

"Fancy taking anybody—there!"

"And who would anybody be?"

Miss Caroline pursed up her lips over that question. She supposed that you did not take respectable persons to a music-hall. And Gurney, of all people! Really, life could be packed with surprises.

"What had I better do with them?" asked her sister.

"Put them back, of course."

"Oughtn't we to burn them?"

Miss Caroline was in no mood to condone or cover up such an indiscretion.

"No, put them back. And say nothing about it."

"Of course not."

But the temptation was too strong for the dear ladies.

The Misses Plimsoll were friends of a particular person, and in the course of conversation, intimate and engaging gossip, that person heard about the horrid things that had been found in Mr. Gurney's pocket. Was it not extraordinary? Was it not disturbing? But, please, say nothing about it. Their friend promised to preserve the secret. Ye Gods and little fishes, yes. The information was too valuable and too significant to be shared with any casual quidnunc. The situation needed exploring.

Gurney travelled third-class, nor was there any studied spruceness in his appearance. He had a pensive, serious look, and mostly he gazed out of the window at a dull and very agricultural landscape, or at the deplorable suburbs of the great city. Yet, Gurney had an affection for those shabby streets; they had been a part of his life, and to him they were not as the hypersensitive and the supercilious saw them, rat-runs, rabbit hutches, noisome places full of sub-human creatures. There might be a roughness and a vulgar candour about those cockneys, but they were very much alive, even in body-odour and *esprit de corps*, and they could be warm-hearted and generous, especially to each other. Gurney gazed a little sadly at the roofs and chimney-pots and back yards, the home-made pigeon-lofts and scraps of garden, the factories, the churches. What a lot of humbug there was in the world. The earnest and the erudite might hold up hands of horror and compassion over these slums. Such things should not be. No, perhaps not, but what a mistake it was to assume that man was a lousy and drunken savage because he did not have geraniums in his front garden, or iron railings to protect it, or bay windows decorated with mock-Gothic pillars.

Gurney walked out of Fenchurch Street Station, and breathed familiar and friendly savours. He would like to have strolled down the Commercial Road and into Dockland. Great fellows, some of those dockers! But the day was to be given to duty, sad and serious duty, and to the shadow of a live regret that walked with him along the crowded pavements. Gurney was full of his own past, and a poignant present. He had not troubled his head about any portion of Southfleet having been on the train with him. A strange innocence possessed him. He had not seen a particular person following him along the platform and down the station stairs.

Gurney walked, and lingered as he walked, up Cheapside and into St. Paul's Churchyard and down Ludgate Hill. All this was the stuff of his boyhood, smells, shop-windows, traffic, save that the smell of petrol was beginning to replace the good old odour of horse-droppings. Nor did urchins in red jackets scurry about

with super-dustpans to clean up those self-same droppings. Change and decay! Did man really progress? Would another Christopher Wren ever create another St. Paul's? Gurney had searched for the beloved toy-shop in Cheapside, and finding that it had been transfigured into a gentleman's outfitters, he had sighed. Sweeting's oysters! He had never been able to afford oysters; he could never remember having eaten an oyster, though Southfleet cultivated them. The dome of St. Paul's floated high above him. He entered the cathedral, and sat down—to meditate.

"Oh, the Magdalen! Why had he——?" He had been no Christ to his Magdalen.

Someone else entered and sat down, but well out of Gurney's line of vision. That someone was glad of a rest, and cherishing unsympathetic corns. Damn the fellow, was he going to walk right across London, and loaf outside a series of shop windows? The shadower was glad of the shade and the coolness of the great building, but not glad of its suggestiveness. There was no scandal to be unearthed if a man did nothing more heinous than sit in St. Paul's Cathedral.

Gurney passed out and strolled on, down Ludgate Hill and up Fleet Street. The Temple lured him and he wandered in and around its pleasant precincts, and the shadower cursed him. Damn this little peripatetic, and damn all corns! The gentleman had a newspaper with him, and challenged by a sudden confrontation, he stood aside and hid his face behind the Press.

So, on into the Strand and to Trafalgar Square. Would the National Gallery or St. Martin's in the Fields persuade this loiterer to enter? They did not. Gurney diverged towards the Charing Cross Road and Leicester Square. His follower gloated. Ha—ha—the chase was growing hot!

Mr. Sawkins was not unfamiliar with Leicester Square. As a middle-aged and secret sensualist he had sniffed around its lamp-posts and railings, and invited the pretty ladies to tempt the unprepossessing male in him. The Empire, the Alhambra, Daly's, Thurston's, shadow of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the pavements, the

plane trees, the grass, the seats sacred in the main to unsuccessful scarecrows. Mr. Sawkins saw Gurney enter the gardens, and seat himself on a seat that looked towards the Empire. Mr. Sawkins prevaricated. He could not sit down without being in danger of being recognized, so, perforce, he had to lean hopefully upon the railings, out of view of Gurney, and with his newspaper ready for any emergency. Was he on the edge of discovering some scandalous incident? He hoped so. There was malice in his mothy beard.

It happened, and gloriously so, according to Mr. Sawkins's philosophy. He saw a woman enter one of the far gates, a particular sort of woman, brassy-headed, flashy, buxom. Barmaid or tottie? He saw Gurney rise, and raise his hat. The lady gave him a peculiar smile. She linked her arm in Gurney's, and they passed out of the gardens together. Mr. Sawkins followed them.

Ye Gods and little fishes, but assuredly he could cook this darned little curate's goose for him! Infernal hypocrite! But Mr. Sawkins wanted chapter and verse, and complete evidence with which to confront and confound this pious humbug. Gurney was off with a "Tart" to a brothel, or to her private retreat, and from the manner of their meeting Mr. Sawkins assumed that these clandestine assignations were of regular occurrence, and that they explained Gurney's visits to London.

Mr. Sawkins forgot his corns. He followed those two up Shaftesbury Avenue. They were still walking arm in arm, and Gurney appeared to be speaking very earnestly to the lady. Casual passers-by could not help noticing this piquant couple, the parson and the flavicomous and painted lady. A cleric picked up by a Tart! Well, well, wasn't that funny! Treacle or raspberry jam? Mr. Sawkins was rubbing invisible hands. Gosh, what a story he would have to tell, and solemnly and responsibly so! He would expose this philandering little hypocrite.

Gurney and his companion turned into a side street, and the lady paused provokingly outside a pub. Gurney demurred. He

said something to her in an appealing voice. "No, Flo, please, not in there." He drew the lady on. Mean little tyke, he wouldn't stand her a drink before getting down to business. So thought Mr. Sawkins. They turned again into another street, paused at the entrance to some working-class flats, and entered. Gurney did not even look round. He appeared to be absorbed in some argument with the lady.

Mr. Sawkins smirked in his beard. He pulled out a note-book and a pencil, and made notes of the day, the hour, the name of the street and the number of the building. He hung about for an hour, but Gurney did not reappear. Obviously, the ritual was being consummated.

"Got him," thought Mr. Sawkins, feeling good, and smiling over the picture of a little priest without his trousers.

Mr. Sawkins felt so good, that he remained in London to dine, and allowed himself lobster and half a bottle of claret. But what a feast he was preparing for that dirty little humbug!

Gurney sat on a hard chair, nursing his hat, the woman on the bed.

"So, you won't listen to me, Florence."

"Why should I?"

"I have tried to be patient. I have tried to——"

She pulled a face at him. It was not a bad-natured face, broad as to the nose and cheek-bones, luscious as to the lips. Her eyes were blue and bold and humorous. They suggested that what Florence Gurney did not know about life was not worth knowing, and she preferred to live it in her own way—thank you. "The greatest mistake you ever made, my lad, was marrying me. Gosh, what a pair of mugs we were. You did try hard, Jack, but oh, lord—how we bored each other!"

"I'm sorry," said Gurney.

She produced a cigarette-case, lit a cigarette, and offered the case to him. He shook his head, and she laughed. Women who smoked were not in Genesis.

"Oh, what a good boy it is! Yes, that's real gold, not wash.

Why did I bring you here? Well, my dear, my other love-nest is paid for by a fellow who's most damnably jealous."

Gurney looked at her earnestly. "Give it up, Florence."

"Me! Don't be a cuckoo. I wasn't made for life in the suburbs. You wouldn't believe it, but I get a lot of fun. There's a lot of tosh talked about virtue. I wasn't born virtuous."

"Who is?"

"You, my lad. Just think what I was faced with when I came to know more about things. Living up to you!"

"I'm sorry, Florence. Was I a prig?"

"No. You were a damned sight too good and earnest for me. Cut it out, Jack."

"I'm ready, to go back to the old——"

"Don't be an idiot. *Me*, a curate's wife in some puddle of a place! I shouldn't last a month; nor would you."

Gurney's hands pressed hard upon his hat. "I still ask you——"

"Good God, why don't you divorce me?"

"I don't believe in divorce."

"Oh, hell, why not be sensible? Isn't there a comfortable woman you would like to marry?"

Gurney looked at a hole in the carpet. "I—I can't——"

"So there is. Gosh, my lad, why don't you marry her? I'd give you my blessing. I'm not a bad lot all through, John. I was born too human; that's my trouble."

"I don't think she——"

"Knows about it? Me? Or——"

"She knows nothing. She doesn't even know that—I——"

"Care? Oh, doesn't she! I bet she does. You're just a sweet kid. You always were a nice kid. Well, why don't you tell her?"

Gurney looked miserable. "I couldn't, somehow. She's so—— I mean, suggesting—I should get a divorce—because——"

She stood up, came forward, and patted the top of his head.

"Poor lamb! What a lot you know about—us!—— Much better get rid of me, my lad. I'll make it easy. As a matter of fact, my present—wants to make a respectable woman of me. Funny, isn't it?"

Gurney looked up at her gravely. "And would you?"

"I might. He likes his liquor, and he throws the money about."

"Ah," said Gurney sadly. "I don't drink, and I never had much money."

His sad face seemed to move her to pity, for, like many of the so-called sinful, she had warm blood in her, and Gurney looked so like a forlorn and hypersensitive child. Almost, she wanted to mother him, say: "Now, Jack, my dear, just you go and do what I tell you, and if you are good and obedient there shall be muffins for tea." She returned to the bed and, sitting cross-legged, jigged a foot up and down, and scattered cigarette ash on the carpet. What could you do with so selfless and simple a creature as John Gurney?

"Fact is, my lad, you're frightened."

"Frightened?"

"Yes, of telling her. Why shouldn't I tell her? I'd give you a good character."

Gurney did look frightened. "Oh, no, Florence, I couldn't——"

She laughed, but her laughter was kind. "Poor Jacko! What do you do? Sit and make dog's eyes?"

"No, I avoid her."

She looked at him with sudden steadfastness.

"As bad as all that, my dear? Now, you go and see a lawyer, and start a divorce. I can give them names. I suppose you wouldn't want damages?"

Gurney was silent, fingering his hat. He gazed at his wife's knees, rose in a hesitant way, crossed over, bent down, and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you, Florence, but——"

And suddenly she put her arms round his neck, and kissed him with emphasis.

"You're much too good for this world, my dear, and you were much too good for me. Well, if you change your mind, let me know."

Gurney appeared to be struggling with emotion. "Yes, Florence, I will. But I still feel to blame."

"About me?"

"Yes."

"You dear old infant, it never was your fault. The one mistake you made was marrying me. Remember the old days at Peckham, and that awful old mousetrap of a dad of mine? Well! You thought you were rescuing me. So did I for six months. Forget all about it, John; wash the slate clean and all that."

Gurney looked sorrowful.

"I don't know whether one can do that with slates."

Gurney returned to Southfleet in the glow of a summer evening to find that the town was pouring its return load of trippers into the station. Gurney extracted himself from all this warm and odoriferous humanity, and wandered along more quiet and decorous streets to the cliffs and the sea. He wanted to be alone. He did not want to return to 7, Cashiobury Terrace, and the Misses Plimsoll and a supper of cold beef and pickles, no, not before nature compelled him to. The cliffs were somewhat serene, the estuary and the sea completely so. Gurney found a seat that was not occupied by lovers or garrulous old women, and sat down and nursed his hat and his problem. He was not very far from Sea View. Its windows were looking out into the evening sky just as he was, but they were happy windows, and Gurney was very unhappy.

He sat there until the twilight came and dew began to descend upon the grass and upon the seat. Oh, blessed dew from heaven, would that it could cool his spirit! He felt so alone with his own tantalizing thoughts, and everything he thought of began with "If!"

It was growing dark, and Gurney sighed, and left the seat, and wandered across the grass and the roadway towards the railings and hedge of that little white house. He stood gazing at its windows. The lights were lit, the blinds and curtains undrawn. It had nothing to hide—had that house. And he——!

Something moved in the dusk. It was Mr. Slade's Panama

hat. He had been sitting in a garden chair, an old man in contemplation, and smoking his evening pipe. He did not see Gurney, and Gurney did not want to be seen. Gurney might feel sentimental about Mr. Slade, partly because of Mr. Slade's daughter, but this was a moment when the things of the heart could be too poignant for any human contact.

XI

IT was a serene summer morning. The sky had innocent eyes; the tide was in, and the sea watered silk. Mr. Sawkins came out upon his balcony, and leaning upon the iron rail, contemplated the geraniums in the hotel gardens, and the pleasant prospect of the day. It would appear that lobster and claret had not disagreed with him, and the day's duty was digesting itself with a breakfast of bacon and eggs. Mr. Sawkins had reached that period in a man's life when he begins to blow, puffing out his lips with little spurts of wind, a habit that appears to be unconscious, though just when a man begins to blow and whether it may be taken as a sign of senility, are points to be decided by the crudite. Mr. Sawkins was not feeling senile. No, sir, he had a very pleasant duty to perform, and he blew over it like an old Tom Cat over a saucer of milk.

Two figures appeared, coming from the direction of the cliffs, the Rev. John Gurney and Mr. Slade, in earnest conversation. Mr. Sawkins emitted a little, self-satisfied belch, and smiled pawkily behind his hand. He was in debt to Mr. Slade for sundry impertinences, and he saw himself in a position to clear that debt. Old Slade was a Gurneyite, but when he—Mr. Sawkins—made his disclosure, James Slade would discover that he had been fooled by a hypocrite. Impudent old fellow, Slade. It would be good business, making him look foolish.

Gurney and Mr. Slade passed by without glancing up at the

gentleman on the balcony. Gurney was looking earnestly into Mr. Slade's face, and Mr. Slade was looking straight before him, like some wise old counsellor considering a problem.

"That's my position, sir. As I have said, I do not hold with divorce, and yet——"

"Too much attention to the letter of the Law may be pedantry, John."

"But marriage is a sacrament."

"Oh, no, John, not always. It may be a tyranny. If your wife is living that sort of life, what sort of sacrament is there in it?"

"None, but——"

"Your continence. I would say—that——"

"One moment, sir, I am a very ordinary man, but my calling forbids me to be an ordinary man. I have a cause to serve, an example to set."

"You mean, that the vulgar might blaspheme?"

"I do not fear that, sir, but my *Imitatio Christi*—is a very real thing to me."

"Your friends know it, John. Why not trust—in them?"

"Yes, sir, but the others?"

"Do they matter? Life is full of mysterious Theys. Look them straight in the face and they cease to be theys."

"Then—you think?"

"Why not take your freedom. I, for one, can see no sin in it. Well—think it over, John."

Gurney left Mr. Slade in the High Street, and turning back, made his way down to the pier. Sea breezes and a stretching of legs were good for the soul, but Gurney was stopped three times by people before he reached the pier. These waylayings were flattering, for Gurney seemed to be a person whom other persons were glad to see, and that is a rare proof of favour. The reaction to most such meetings may be to avoid them and to pass by on the other side. Dr. Richmond, who also suffered from the affection of his fellows, was finding in the motor-car a chariot of escape, for it travelled faster than a horse, and could demand that he should attend strictly to business.

Gurney arrived at last at the Pier Head, after hearing about someone's ignoble stomach, and someone else's ignoble son, but in the ticket-office he discovered the shrewd, caustic and hairy face of old Rawlins. The Southfleet Socrates had taken a liking to Gurney, and he boasted of liking few people. During the winter old Rawlins had been laid up with bronchitis and Gurney had visited him, and so successfully that the visit had become a daily affair. Gurney had been present at the lighting of Rawlins's first convalescent pipe, and had sympathized with the old man's coughings and splutterings, and had even condoned them by buying and bringing him an ounce of shag.

"Funny, isn't it, sir, but we do like doing the things we oughtn't to do; we don't like—t'other. Excoose me sayin' so, but that's 'ooman nature."

Gurney had smiled upon him. "Because one enjoys a thing, Rawlins, it isn't always sinful."

"There you are, sir. You ain't one of them 'Don't' doctors. There be people who do love sayin' 'no' to everything. Like to catch 'em out, I do. Ties themselves in knots with their bl—beg your pardon, sir, bloomin' 'umbug."

Gurney had to pay a penny before passing the turnstile, and old Rawlins, had he had his way, would have suffered Gurney to pass without paying. Gurney dipped into a right-hand trouser pocket and produced a sixpence, two pennies, and a halfpenny in the palm of his hand. Old Rawlins looked at them attentively. It was understood in Southfleet that Gurney was poor, and that he had nothing but his curate's pay, and yet he gave money away. Old Rawlins was a bit of a miser, and perhaps for that very reason he saw the rare and veritable saint in Gurney.

"A pennorth o' fresh air, sir."

"Yes, and peace, Rawlins."

Gurney laid the penny down, and old Rawlins let it lie there as though it was no ordinary coin, and passed Gurney a ticket. Gurney was not looking quite his happy self, and old Rawlins wondered. Was it indigestion or the Rev. Egbert Jones?

"Yes, peace, sir. One do get sick of seein' too many 'ooman faces. I see 'em all day."

"Yes, you do, Rawlins."

"Shut up in a 'utch, so to speak. Why, there be times when I could spit."

Gurney's smile came back. How refreshing these simple souls could be after too much gentility, and the affectations of those who dared not appear poor.

"I'm not allowed to spit, Rawlins."

"No, sir. But this 'ere place, or part of it, could do with a bit of shockin'."

Gurney passed on, and old Rawlins peered out and watched him go seawards, and then Mr. Rawlins did a peculiar thing. He produced a penny from his own pocket and put it in the till, and picking up Gurney's penny, slipped it into a waistcoat pocket.

"I'll keep that for luck."

Gurney walked fast towards the end of the pier, with the air of a man who was out by himself and wished to remain so. The pier was quiet at this early hour. The holiday crowd had not yet poured on to it from steamer and train. It was a perfect day and the Union Jack on the flagstaff at the pier-head hung in folds that gave but an occasional flutter. A few fishermen were leaning upon the railings. Gurney descended to the lower deck where the green water was awash just under his feet. He leaned upon one of the rusty chains hanging between the great oak piles, and watched the water and the play of light upon it. The moist suck and prattle of the sea made him think of laughter, soft and inevitable laughter, her laughter. Sunlight upon infinite, diamond-like facets. Light in a woman's eyes. Gurney removed his hat. His head was in the sunlight, his body in the shadow. Well, one's body and head should be like that. The wet wash of the sea soothed him. It went on and on, eternally, like God's will, unhindered by the moods of men. A little breeze came over the water. Reflected sunlight flickered over the black timber. There were white sails over yonder. The dark bulk of a

steamer swung into view; she was in ballast, and Gurney could hear the beat of the screw. How like a heart it was! Serenity returned to him. Why suffer your own little disharmonies to creak and strain upon God's earth and sea?

Mr. Sawkins came very near to spoiling the dramatic climax he was preparing. Malice tempted him. How pleasant it would be to take a rise out of old Slade, to buttonhole him and say: "Well, I've caught your little St. John without his trousers. That dashed hypocrite has fooled you all quite nicely. I saw him going home with a prostitute." But Mr. Sawkins resisted the temptation. The stage was set, and any premature rehearsal might spoil the grand finale for the larger audience.

Mr. Sawkins waited until the afternoon. He sent notes by hand to three or four friends, with a hint that he had something important to impart, and that he would be glad of their collaboration. They would find him at the club between six and seven. The gentlemen gathered, and in a corner of the smoking-room Mr. Sawkins stood whiskies all round, which was rare generosity on his part, but the occasion deserved it. He was exceedingly grave and deliberate. No smug smirk must deface his sense of civic duty.

"Gentlemen, I happened to be in London the other day, and I was on my way to Regent's Street and I happened to pass through Leicester Square. You may not believe me, for the coincidence seems so extraordinary, but I saw a certain person pick up a—prostitute—and go off with her."

"Well, that's not unusual, old man."

"But when I tell you who the person was—"

"Go on, Sam; don't keep us guessing."

"I was strolling one day down the Lowther Arcade."

Mr. Sawkins gave the facetious friend a severe glance.

"This is a very serious matter, Robson. It shocked me."

"Well, out with it."

"The person I saw was Gurney."

"Gurney?"

"Go on, you're kidding."

"I most certainly am not."

"Why, the naughty little devil!"

"Are you quite sure, Sam?"

"Absolutely. I was so shocked that I followed them."

"My hat! And he went home with the tart?"

"He did. A low kind of street in Soho. I have the name and number."

"Gosh, what a filthy little hypocrite. By Jove, St. John has been caught in the slips."

Mr. Sawkins rubbed his hands together. "Gentlemen, I think it is our duty to take this matter very seriously. I—regard it as a very disgusting revelation of hypocrisy."

"I should say so, Sam."

"Personally, I feel it to be my duty to carry the matter to the Rev. Egbert Jones. But before doing anything I decided to ask for the advice of my—friends."

This self-constituted committee upon morals had no difficulty in arriving at a decision. These minor capitalists disapproved of Gurney because he appeared ready to preach their capital away, which, after all, was but human nature, and a desire to defend what was theirs. They were no more culpable than working-class Southfleet which approved of Gurney because he seemed to suggest that money should be transferred from the pockets of the more fortunate or the more industrious to pockets that were less full. A great part of human opinion is founded upon personal prejudice, and created by self-interest, and man has a genius for persuading himself that what seems right and good for him, should be right and good for everybody.

It was agreed that Mr. Sawkins, as the disinterrer of this scandal, should interview Mr. Egbert Jones and expose Gurney's secret sin. Mr. Sawkins accepted the responsibility; he had expected its delegation. Also, it was suggested that some sort of Court of Morals should be created, privately so, to inquire into the affair. The Rev. Egbert Jones might call a meeting in the vestry

at which certain prominent parishioners should be present, and Gurney arraigned before them.

"If it's proved," said one of the gentlemen, "it will be a case for the Bishop."

"He'll lose his dog-collar."

"Serve the little humbug right."

Mr. Sawkins dined, lit a cigar, and went forth in the glow of the sunset and the warmth of righteousness and happy malice, to call upon Mr. Egbert Jones. Mr. Sawkins did not hurry. He wanted to finish his cigar before ringing the vicarage bell, for it would be bad form to arrive with a cigar in one's mouth when that same mouth was to utter words of righteous indignation. Like Mr. Slade, the Rev. Egbert Jones was a gardener, and he specialized in chrysanthemums, and exhibited them at local flower-shows. He called them his "Mums", which might have been taken as a piece of symbolism, for on delicate and controversial subjects the Rev. Egbert could be mum. He had been pottering round his conservatory, refreshing some of the flower labels with an indelible pencil, when Mr. Sawkins rang the vicarage bell. Mr. Jones had just refreshed Maiden's Blush, a plant of his own breeding, when the maid came to tell him that Mr. Sawkins was in the study and wishing to see him.

"Mr. Sawkins, Mary?"

"Yes, Mr. Sawkins, sir."

Mr. Jones said: "Oh, bother" to himself, and put his pencil away. There was no Maiden's Blush about old Sawkins. Broken Egg would have been more applicable. Now, what did he want? Wretched fellow! Mr. Sawkins was a trouble-maker, a human gadfly who bit you just when you were feeling at peace with the world.

Mr. Jones opened the study door, and saw the evening sunlight shining in upon this apostle of virtue. There are some people who can express solemnity with an almost apostolic gravity, and Mr. Sawkins was such. He rose, holding his hat in front of him rather like a certain vulgar receptacle.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, Mr. Sawkins. What can I do for you?"

Mr. Sawkins glanced at the door.

"A very grave and confidential matter, sir. I take it we shall not be overheard."

Mr. Jones looked austere. "This room is a sanctum, sir."

"What I have to disclose is not for idle ears," and Mr. Sawkins sat down, and seemed to draw a deep and portentous breath.

Mr. Jones put his desk between himself and his visitor. Strange, how a particular chair and a particular pose can reinforce a man's dignity! Bother old Sawkins! He was always digging up uncomfortable subjects, like some body-snatcher busy in a graveyard.

Mr. Jones put his fingers together. "I gather, Mr. Sawkins, that you have something to impart."

"I have, sir, and a very serious thing. May I say that I took advice before coming to you. I am moved by my duty as a citizen and a parishioner."

Mr. Jones inclined his head. "And how does the matter concern me?"

"It concerns your curate, Mr. Jones, and so—you."

"Gurney?"

"Precisely. Are you aware, sir, that your curate goes to London and consorts with loose women?"

Mr. Jones sat up in his chair. His lips grew thin, his nostrils pinched.

"Mr. Sawkins, do you suggest——?"

"I *do*, sir."

"A most improper suggestion. A most insulting one. I——"

"My dear sir, I am not suggesting—that—you——"

"I should hope not. This is a very grave accusation."

"And I make it—in all seriousness, and on good evidence."

The vicar calmed down. He looked at Mr. Sawkins's beard, and appeared to find inspiration there. Was it possible that for once in a while this old moral filibuster was going to prove useful? This might be the occasion for which Emily had coun-

selled him to wait. If this scandalous accusation was true, there would be no more Gurney in Southfleet or anywhere else. Even the most devoted disciples could not condone lechery in a man who had set so high a standard.

"Perhaps, Mr. Sawkins, you will tell me how you came to obtain—this—information?"

"Personal observation, sir. A fortunate or unfortunate coincidence, just as you choose to describe it."

"You saw——?"

"I did, sir. I happened to be passing through Leicester Square, and I saw Gurney pick up a prostitute."

"But are you—convinced——?"

Mr. Sawkins smirked. "I think, sir, that sort of woman is easily recognized."

"How very shocking! And then——?"

"Well, sir, I too was shocked. I felt it my duty to make sure. I followed the couple and saw them enter a disreputable-looking sort of house in a back street. And Gurney remained there."

"How—very—shocking!" said Mr. Jones, trying to look pained.

Mr. Sawkins brought out a handkerchief and wiped his moustache and beard. They were smeared with invisible venom.

"Are you quite sure of all your—facts, Mr. Sawkins?"

"I am, sir, I have them here in a note-book. Date, time, place."

Mr. Jones bent his head. "This is a very grave—disclosure. It amazes me."

"My friends and I are of the opinion, sir, that action should be taken. I suggest that there should be a meeting in the vestry, and that Gurney should be asked to attend."

"One moment, Mr. Sawkins. I think the responsibility is mine."

"It is everybody's responsibility, sir. Such gross deceit, such ignoble hypocrisy!"

"Quite, quite. But I wish to reflect upon the matter," which meant that the Rev. Egbert wished to consult his Emily.

XII

SO, the storm gathered for John Gurney, and no warning of it came to him. George was home for the holidays, and he and Gurney were playing much cricket. The Lads' Cricket Club which Gurney had founded, and which had caused Mr. Jones to suffer other pangs of jealousy, was a very live and lusty affair. Gurney coached his lads three evenings a week, and had discovered a potential fast bowler, one Tom Beeson, who was to become the county's professional star. Gurney had a way with lads. He was completely natural, and utterly unafraid of them, and he did not talk down like the Rev. Egbert Jones. There was no, "Now, my boys," about it. To Gurney it was Tom, and Alf, and Fred. The spotty lout seemed to shed his spots, modify the raucous arrogance in his voice, and absorb manners as well as cricket under Gurney's example.

He was something of a hero, for simple folk do love to have their hero. Gurney did not preach chastity; he lived it, and to lads in that most difficult of periods when the surge of sex comes in like the sea, this little man did possess for them a something which other men might lack. You might not be able to suppress all that was in you, but here was a man who set both a visible and an invisible standard. Personality can penetrate and permeate the impressionable wax of youth. No lad wished to be shamed before Gurney. Raw flesh might out, but that something which transcended it looked up and out into that trusted face, and wished to be like it and to be liked by it. Gurney played good cricket. The game was the thing. You could not let your side and your self down by funking or messing about. You had to stand up to fast bowling, and not snarl and talk of bad luck when you lost a match. Gurney taught his lads how to take a beating.

Mrs. Egbert Jones agreed with Mr. Sawkins. What a repulsive hypocrite was this little curate! Mrs. Jones, like many good

women with plain exteriors, became rabid and merciless when any Rahab came into the picture. This was no mere heaven-sent opportunity to get rid of too earnest an underling; it was an inevitable and public duty. Mrs. Jones was of the opinion that Egbert should call a private and confidential meeting of the churchwardens, sidesmen, and one or two prominent parishioners, including Mr. Sawkins, and lay the case before them. Let it be decided by this body of elders what steps should be taken.

The Rev. Egbert Jones accepted his wife's advice. He wrote letters, marked private and confidential, to Mr. Marsden, Mr. Golightly, Mr. Sawkins, Mr. Slade, two other sidesmen, Dr. Richmond, and three more gentlemen. Would they attend a meeting in the vestry at six o'clock on the following Friday to discuss a very grave matter. Mr. Jones had been inclined to boggle over the inclusion of Mr. Slade, for Mr. Slade was a hot Gurneyite, but maybe Mr. Jones felt some pleasure in the prospect of disillusioning Mr. Slade. Mr. Slade could be too obviously a saintly person.

But two or three of the recipients were not satisfied with the vagueness of the invitation, among them Mr. Golightly and Dr. Richmond. Mr. Golightly liked his invoices to be in proper order. He walked round to tackle the vicar, and walked out again with brittle gravity. He had been shocked, but he had not liked the pervading scent of Sawkins. Dr. Richmond, chancing upon Mr. Jones in the Old Town, stopped his car, and got out. He too received the news delivered with chilly caution under the brim of Mr. Jones's clerical hat.

"Who was the informer? Sawkins?"

"Yes."

"It would be." But Dr. Richmond did not add the words he uttered inwardly: "The septic old sneak."

Dr. Richmond, having escaped a perilous scandal and professional destruction by the mercy of God and the magnanimity of two women, was sympathetic towards Gurney. Even if the little man had fallen momentarily from grace and behaved as

mere man, well, there were times when the flesh proved stronger than the spirit. And to be spied upon and betrayed by an old Judas like Sawkins! Dr. Richmond had few secrets from his wife, and those were professional ones, and when he told her the story she would not accept it.

"I don't believe it, Corrie."

What a woman! For she was angry, yet with a serene anger that was clean and selfless.

"I simply don't believe it."

He looked at her with profound affection. "You wouldn't, Lucy. You are——"

"No, I'm not just a sweet fool. I think I know what life is, and I simply don't believe that Gurney is a humbug."

"After all, he is a man."

"I know, my dear. But it is Sawkins's word against his. And Sawkins——"

"Is a nasty and septic product. I agree. But I don't think that even Sawkins would invent——"

"He might misconstrue. What of the story of Christ and Mary Magdalene?"

Once again Dr. Richmond looked at his wife as at a creature who was unique.

"It's possible."

"There may be an explanation."

"I hope there is."

Now, both Dr. Richmond and Mr. Golightly approached Mr. Slade, Dr. Richmond on his wife's suggestion, Mr. Golightly on an intuition that was his own. Mr. Slade heard them both, and his shrewd old face was puckered with mischief. So, Sawkins had his feet in the trough! Ought not Gurney to be warned? No, sir, let the game be played. Mr. Slade would not say what his reasons were, or confess to private information. Almost, he chuckled and said: "I think it may prove quite an interesting meeting. Be there. I don't think you will be disappointed."

Gurney received a note from Mr. Jones. He was requested to attend a meeting in the vestry at six-thirty on the coming Friday. The Rev. Egbert stated that it was to be a meeting of much importance, and on no account must Gurney fail to attend it, but Mr. Jones gave Gurney no warning of the ordeal that was being prepared for him. The Rev. Egbert Jones, like many large and looming men with fat heads and fat thighs, and a rolling voice, was a coward, and maybe he secretly hoped that Gurney might get wind of the scandal, pack his bag and disappear. That would both prove his guilt, and rid Mr. Jones of an embarrassing situation and a junior of whom he was jealous.

Gurney remained in complete innocence. He was on the sports ground at five-thirty, coaching one or two of his lads, and bowling them leg-breaks, for they had a match on the morrow. It was a hot evening, and Gurney was in his shirt sleeves. At ten minutes past six he put on his coat, and left the lads busy at the nets. His collar had suffered from perspiration, and was not quite what it should have been, or would be if Mr. Sawkins had his way.

Mr. Slade sat and smiled and said nothing. He had crossed eyes with a righteously indignant and soapy Mr. Sawkins. Mr. Sawkins had stated that it was with deep regret that he brought the matter before the meeting, and Mr. Slade had just smiled at him and said nothing. It was a dirty bird that fouled its own beard and other people's reputations. The Rev. Egbert Jones sat as chairman, a carefully grieved and groomed ecclesiastic, who, by the expression of modest woe that he had assumed, might have been listening to the story of his dear Emily's indiscretion with the baker's roundsman. Mr. Slade was feeling naughty, oh, so very naughty. He observed the various faces. Dr. Richmond's face was grave, serious and silent, as though he was considering some difficult case. Mr. Golightly, spruce and alert, had the air of a man who knew when silk was silk. Mr. Marsden looked bored; he had been compelled to forgo a game of cards at the Yacht Club in order to deal with this dirty linen.

Two other gentlemen sat on their hard chairs with attentive solemnity. Mr. Sawkins had put his case, and produced his evidence. There was silence.

Said Mr. Jones: "Has any gentleman anything to suggest?"

Mr. Golightly took up the challenge. "I—most certainly have, sir. Has Mr. Gurney received any warning?"

Mr. Jones caressed his chin. "No. I asked him to attend, at six-thirty."

"So, he comes in front of us—quite unprepared?"

"That is so."

Dr. Richmond's deep and deliberate voice was heard. "In my opinion he should have been warned, and not brought here——"

Said Mr. Slade: "Yes, in his nightshirt, to stand in the pillory."

Mr. Jones looked pained. "Gentlemen, it was my feeling—that——"

"You will excuse me," said Mr. Golightly. "I think there has been lack of feeling."

"Hear, hear," said Mr. Slade.

Mr. Sawkins chewed his beard; Mr. Marsden looked bored, Mr. Jones unhappy.

Mr. Golightly pulled out his watch. It was a presentation piece, made by the Goldsmiths' Company, and represented the 25th anniversary of Mr. Golightly's business, a token of esteem from friends and employees. Mr. Golightly was paternal towards his staff, and in spite of certain idiosyncrasies was liked and respected by them. His motto was: "I have made money, and money shall not make me mean." Mr. Golightly looked at his watch. It had a solemn, but pleasant face, and was becoming a valued friend.

"It is now six-twenty-three, gentlemen. I take it that Mr. Gurney will be with us in seven minutes. What procedure shall we adopt?"

He looked at Dr. Richmond and Mr. Slade who were sitting side by side, and almost Mr. Slade winked at him.

"I think," said the doctor, "that the responsibility rests with Mr. Jones. He should state the case to Mr. Gurney."

The vicar looked embarrassed. He waved his hands to and fro.

"Gentlemen, I would much prefer that some impartial member should——"

"Will you do it, doctor?" The proposal was Mr. Golightly's.

"I? Well, it is not the kind of duty I would choose. But if——"

Mr. Slade gave Dr. Richmond a gentle nudge. "It would come—more—kindly from you, sir."

"Very well. I'll do it."

Gurney opened the vestry door. He had had to hurry and he was feeling hot and apologetic. He was aware of all those faces looking at him. How serious these faces were, as though their owners were jurymen deciding the fate of some offender. What was it all about? He stood holding the handle of the door, suddenly conscious of a strange feeling of being accused, but of what? Had these other men been in conference, and were now waiting—for him? Why for him, and why had he not been included in the party?

"I hope I am not late, gentlemen?"

He looked at the Rev. Egbert Jones, and the vicar's eyes slid away from his.

"No. Come in, Mr. Gurney."

The next face to the Jones's face was that of Mr. Sawkins. It did not veil itself in sensitive obliqueness, but seemed to glare like a bearded planet straight at him. There was a curious, gloating gleam in its pale eyes. And why was Mr. Sawkins here?

Gurney closed the door. Unfriendly faces, those two, the one enigmatic, the other horribly hostile. His glance passed on, and met Mr. Slade's eyes. Mr. Slade was smiling at him, and Gurney felt glad of that smile. This austere room had an uncomfortable atmosphere, and the chairs were hard.

"Please sit down, Mr. Gurney."

This was from Dr. Richmond, and though Dr. Richmond was not smiling, his eyes were calm and kind. There was a vacant chair next to Mr. Golightly, and Mr. Golightly gave it a friendly push, and nodded at Gurney.

Gurney sat down. He had been perspiring, and suddenly he felt chilled. Something shivered down his spine. He was conscious of vague apprehension, like some warm-blooded creature thrust into an ice-box. His eyes stood out, and Mr. Sawkins, who was watching him, began to snicker inwardly. The little scoundrel was frightened.

"Mr. Gurney."

Gurney looked at the speaker, Dr. Richmond. His hands lay heavy on his hat.

"Mr. Gurney, this is not an occasion that gives me any pleasure, but in fairness to you—we are here to let you answer a certain accusation. A gentleman—who—er—is present, has stated that you were seen in London in company with a—certain type of woman."

Gurney sat mute, staring at Dr. Richmond. "A certain type of woman, sir?"

"Yes," said a voice. "A common prostitute."

Gurney gave one quick glance at the speaker. "I was in London——"

"Here are the details. It is right that you should have them. Friday, July 10th. Place, Leicester Square. You and the lady—then went to——"

Gurney gave a quick lift of the head. He moistened his lips, and seemed about to speak. Then, his head went down, and his hands covered his face.

"Ha, got him!" thought Mr. Sawkins.

Then, Gurney spoke. "Gentlemen, the lady was—my wife."

For half a minute there was a dreadful stillness. Mr. Golightly, head up, spruce and grey and competent, turned to glance at Gurney, and his brows contracted. Dr. Richmond was also looking at Gurney with sudden understanding and compassion. Mr. Jones appeared a little bewildered. The other gentlemen

were sitting very erect in their chairs, uncomfortably stiffened by Gurney's emotion. Mr. Slade's eyes were fixed upon Mr. Sawkins, and there was smiling contempt in them, and triumph, for Mr. Sawkins was looking sick.

Gurney's hands came down, and his head went up.

"Excuse—the—lack of self-control, gentlemen, but it was all so sudden. I have been in the habit of meeting my wife—occasionally. Mine was—a disastrous marriage, and the fault may have been mine. My wife was not——"

He paused and swallowed, and most of those other men looked everywhere but at him. They were feeling sore with themselves and with the situation. It was Dr. Richmond who laid a large firm hand, and a large calm voice on the meeting.

"Mr. Gurney, I am sure I speak for all of us when I say that I deeply regret this rude intrusion into your personal affairs. I am sure none of us wish to pursue it further."

There was a murmur from the room. "Well said, doctor."

"I'm sorry we——"

Mr. Golightly bent over and silently patted Gurney's arm. Mr. Jones had found a bland and benignant smile. It was Mr. Slade who stood up and looked at Mr. Sawkins.

"I think that an apology is indicated—from a certain gentleman."

All of them looked at Mr. Sawkins, and Mr. Sawkins glared, rubbed his beard, and appeared to be about to say something. He did say something.

"I should like to see the marriage license."

Mr. Slade went white. "That's a most damnable——"

But Gurney was up, and standing before Mr. Sawkins.

"If you will come to my rooms, sir, I shall have much pleasure in showing it to you."

Someone said: "How's that, Sawkins?"

Mr. Slade answered the question. "Clean bowled."

XIII

AS Gurney walked down the aisle arm in arm with Mr. Slade, and with Dr. Richmond on the other side of him, he was reminded of that dramatic day in a suburban church when he had armed his young wife down the aisle to the exultant trumpetings of the Marriage March. There was no such triumphant music now, though Gurney's ordeal had ended in an apparent triumph. Mr. Jones and Mr. Golightly were following behind them. Mr. Jones's voice was nibbling at the air, for, when the blandly pretentious self in him had been rebuffed, he seemed to lose his round complacency and become precise and jejune. The Rev. Egbert was feeling that he had been fooled, if not made to look foolish, and that, of course, was unseemly. But was it not also unseemly that St. Jude's should possess a curate whose wife was a prostitute? Something would have to be done about it. But what? Gurney could not remain united to a woman who was living in sin.

Mr. Marsden was looking at his watch and wondering whether he could crowd in a game of cards before dinner. No, but he could go to the club and thrill its gossips with a most juicy bit of information. Mr. Sawkins followed some yards behind rather like an eczematous and smelly old dog whom nobody wished to own. Mr. Golightly was very much head-up, and walking on his toes, and feeling as happily ironical as a silk-mercer who has caught a bagman trying to fob him off with something that was not Lyons.

Mr. Slade, Gurney and Dr. Richmond paused in the porch.

"You are coming home to supper with me, John."

"Am I, sir?"

"You are."

Dr. Richmond smiled at Mr. Slade. "You are a forestaller, Mr. Slade."

"Am I, sir?"

"Yes, I was going to take Gurney home with me."

Mr. Golightly, joining them, shook Gurney by the hand. "Congratulations, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Golightly."

The Rev. Egbert Jones loomed down upon them. He too, should be congratulating his curate, but his complacency was suffering from both moral and emotional constipation. Yet he managed to produce a polite murmur.

"A most fortunate—finale, Gurney. I am sure Mr. Sawkins must regret——"

Dr. Richmond cut him short. "That the poison did not work, sir."

Mr. Sawkins heard those words, and snarled over them. "I think I had better warn you, doctor, that libellous——"

Dr. Richmond gave him a steadfast and contemptuous stare.

So, they passed upon their several ways, Mr. Slade and Gurney arm in arm, Dr. Richmond and Mr. Golightly sharing their sarcasm upon Sawkins, Mr. Marsden and the other gentlemen to the club, Mr. Jones to his Emily, Mr. Sawkins to his hotel. The Rev. Egbert felt that his dignity had suffered, and that it was in moult, and that he could not crow like a good, ecclesiastical chanticleer. He found his wife reading the *Church Times*, and waiting eagerly for news.

"Well, Egbert?"

Mr. Jones, feeling crestfallen, put on his pulpit voice.

"Most—er—confusing. The woman —r—is Gurney's wife."

Mrs. Jones's pince-nez slid off her nose. "His wife! And is—she——?"

"Yes, ahem—I'm afraid she is."

"A common prostitute!"

"Er, I suppose so."

"My dear Egbert, we can't keep a curate who is married to a woman like that."

Mr. Jones stroked his chin. "A most embarrassing situation. I must reflect upon it."

"But are you sure that he was telling the truth?"

"He offered to produce the marriage-licence."

"Yes, yes," and Mrs. Jones waved her right first finger like a conductor's baton, "but don't you see—he may be married, but not to the woman Sawkins saw."

Mr. Jones had to confess that he had not considered that possibility.

"Really, Egbert, how easily you men are deceived. I think Gurney ought to produce his wife, and let Mr. Sawkins——"

But Mr. Jones had had enough for one day. His wife, like so many wives, behaved as though she was a superior being in intelligence and understanding, and the very large worm in Mr. Jones turned. He wanted to say: "Well, really, Emily, you have a nasty, suspicious mind, and you can be a terrible prig. I'm not so sure that the other sort of woman might not be a relief—on occasions." But a vicar could not make such retorts to a vicaress. What he did say was: "I shall really be obliged, my dear, if you will leave the matter to me."

Gurney felt tired, strangely and inwardly tired, as though the virtue had gone out of him. Though other men had shown their faith in him and given him sympathy, he felt that he had been humiliated before those other men. His wife was a loose woman. He might cry "Mea culpa", but the sorriness of the whole show had made him feel a shabby and futile little failure. How nice to be known as a man who was so feebly man in the vulgar sense, that the woman he had married had preferred the casual male! For Gurney was no passionless saint, and his very humanity and his self-chastening had made him what he was, an artist in the fastidious way of living. To be stalked and informed against by a man like Mr. Sawkins!—for he had come to suspect that the discovery had not been fortuitous.

Mr. Slade kept silent, but somehow he could sense the sorrowful slackness of the man whose arm he held.

"Treacle tart for supper, John. I ordered it, in advance."

Mr. Slade continued to speak of the day's last meal as supper, perhaps out of a puckish notion that tradesmen did not dine at

half-past seven. Gurney glanced into those shrewd old eyes, so kind and wise and humorous.

"How—foreseeing of you, sir."

"No need to talk if you don't feel like it."

"Sometimes it helps. You did believe——?"

"Of course I believed. So did Richmond and Golightly. Perhaps I ought to have warned you, but I rather thought that the Sawkins petard should be left to explode under his own shirt-tails."

Gurney was silent, looking straight before him. "I feel—I ought not to stay here, sir."

"What, leave us?"

"I shall be a figure of fun—to those who——"

"Do not matter."

"To me—all men matter."

"You are being too sensitive, John."

"Or too much the egoist. Which? How thin the skin of one's self can be!"

Mr. Slade pressed his arm. "Thin skins suffer, but they heal."

When they came to the gate of Sea View Gurney saw Mr. Slade's daughter sitting in the green veranda with a book in her lap. Did she too know? But whether she knew or not his fear of her was poignant; and almost he flinched and fled. But George too was there, sitting cross-legged on the grass and oiling and polishing a new bat. He was up and flourishing it at Gurney, and Gurney felt glad of the boy's presence. Though, not much more than an hour ago he had been bowling to George, such cheerful, cunning balls. How much could happen to humiliate you in an hour!

"Oh Mr. Gurney, Tom Myall can't play to-morrow. Can I play?"

Gurney looked bothered. To-morrow's match? He had forgotten all about it, and the prospect of that public appearance frightened him.

"Yes, perhaps you can, George."

"What luck for me!"

"Tut-tut," said his grandfather, "no gloating over somebody else's—bad luck."

"I wasn't gloating, grandpa."

His mother had been looking steadfastly at Gurney, but when his eyes turned to hers she glanced at her father. Mr. Slade nodded. He still had Gurney by the arm, as though he divined John Gurney's impulse towards flight.

"Well, I think a little sherry is indicated."

"Not for me, sir."

"Fudge! Do you good, John. Do all of us good. Rose, my dear——"

Mrs. Hallard left her chair. "I'll fetch the decanter and glasses. Shall it be out here?"

Mr. Slade nodded and smiled.

Gurney found himself sitting in the veranda beside Mr. Slade, with George squatting at his feet, his little, freckled face upturned. Gurney had something he wanted to say to Mr. Slade, but he could not say it before the boy, and George was happy at the feet of his hero.

"I suppose I shall have to go in last, Mr. Gurney?"

"Yes, George, I'm afraid you will, but you can carry your bat, you know."

"Willowwell beat us last time, didn't they?"

"They did."

"I hope we wop them to-morrow."

Mr. Slade somehow divined that restlessness in Gurney, the voice that would utter words that could not be spoken before the child, for, to some old men the painted screen of the senses grows thin and through it shines an infinite understanding. Mr. Slade would never wear the dead and passionless face of the very old. Life had not lost its mystery, but amplified it. Mr. Slade could say—"Strange, but I feel those other invisible things more than I did when I was young. I see the soul of a tree. There is a sun behind the sun."

"George, my lad."

"Yes, grandpa."

"I forgot about biscuits. Fetch 'em."

George scrambled up, and disappeared into the little white house, and Mr. Slade looked at Gurney.

"Well, my friend?"

"Will you tell your daughter. I—can't."

"Yes, John, I will tell her."

Some of the light came back into Gurney's eyes. "Did you know that I was going to ask you to do that?"

"Somehow I had a feeling about it."

"And you sent the boy away. Thanks, my friend. You see more deeply into things—than——"

"John, I feel and enjoy life so vividly, that sometimes I wonder at it, and ask why——"

"Need you ask why? God is with us when we see with eyes such as yours."

Mrs. Hallard took the head of her table, but it was Mr. Slade who carved. George and Gurney faced each other, with a bowl of flowers between them. Gurney could look full-faced at the son, if he was afraid of the mother, and perhaps in that pleasant room which was not too dark and not too light, faces and eyes had a less urgent but more mysterious meaning. Gurney was reminded of a picture that was a particular favourite of his: Millais's "Lorenzo in the House of Isabella". He could not look at his Isabella with Lorenzo's young and profound adoration, but he could look at Isabella's son, nor was there any Pot of Basil in prospect for him.

Roast duck and green peas! Mr. Slade was skilful in dismembering the bird, and George's eyes were healthily greedy.

"I wish you'd come often, sir."

"Now," said Mr. Slade, "wouldn't you think that the boy was starved?"

"I like to be hungry, grandpa."

"Bless my soul, at your age, you shouldn't be thinking about being hungry."

"Well, what should I think about?"

"Not thinking about it at all, my dear."

Gurney glanced at his plate and saw that he had been given breast. His glance passed to Rose's plate. She too had breast. Did that mean leg or wing for Mr. Slade? Well, wings would suit him.

"I'm afraid you have given me—the best cut, sir."

"Well, if I have, John, that's—justice."

When a man is in love and impossibly in love no meal may seem ordinary, and though Gurney had no appetite even for roast duck, he had to be courteous in showing appreciation. George's face kept appearing round the bowl of flowers. George was puzzled by the atmosphere and Mr. Gurney's mute and feeding face. Mr. Gurney was not like this on the cricket pitch.

"Is yours tough, Mr. Gurney?"

Gurney looked up suddenly, and swallowed.

"Tough, George? What?"

"Your duck?"

"No, it's a lovely duck."

"Mine's——"

"Leg, my son," said Mr. Slade, "and legs are legs. My wing is angelic."

But was George's leg tough? The possible texture of a duck's leg suggested other toughnesses to Mr. Slade. The quality of more toughness might be valuable to Gurney. Let him pull faces at the vulgar-minded. But what a ridiculous business life could be; and the best thing you could do was to chuckle over it, and indulge in gentle irony. Tough duck and cricket, and Gurney feeling tragic, and his daughter's mysteriously serene face, and a boy stuffing a healthy stomach. Now, what could be simpler than a supper-table and four people sitting round it, and profounder complications of the situation might have puzzled a philosopher.

Gurney was glad when the meal was over. Love and treacle tart seemed to stick in his throat. He felt poor in spirit as well as in purse, and his Isabella was a young woman of wealth. He could love her in silence and in secret hate her wealth. Every-

thing was against him, poor creature. This humiliation! He was glad when he could go out into the garden with Mr. Slade and watch Mr. Slade fill his pipe. Mrs. Hallard did not follow them, and she kept George with her.

"You must not bother Mr. Gurney."

"But I don't bother him."

"Mother knows best," which was a lame way of expressing something that she had divined.

"You ought to smoke a pipe, John," said Mr. Slade.

"I don't."

"I know. Take to it. A pipe of the bulldog breed. And bite hard on it."

Gurney smiled rather wistfully. "Are you trying to suggest, sir?"

"I am. You may not be allowed to cock-snooks at the unco good, but you can cock a pipe at 'em. Stuff it in the old women's faces, and brandish a pot of beer."

Gurney looked bothered. "You think I'm too——"

"Well, I don't know. Remember the duck's leg."

Mr. Slade told Gurney's story to his daughter, after George had gone to bed. She heard it very calmly, for how else should she hear it? So, Gurney had a Florence just as she had had a Hector, and Gurney had fled from Florence but not quite as Hector had fled from her. Poor little man! To be made to bolt by an old ferret like Mr. Sawkins. She felt compassionate towards Gurney, but rather coldly and maternally so. He might be the shadow of a saint, and brisk on the cricket-field, but he was still a shadow to her, perceptible but not capable of producing a vivid sensuous impression.

"Poor little man."

Her father frowned over those words. Not much hope for Gurney, with a flavicomous Florence in the background, and such cool pity in his daughter's voice.

"Well, you know, rather humiliating, my dear."

"You mean——?"

"To be just a poor little man."

"Did I sound contemptuous?"

Mr. Slade lit a last pipe. Tobacco was always going in and going out, and the fireplace would be full of unsmoked dottles.

"He thinks he ought to leave us."

"Run away? But——"

"Cowardly, what? Well, not quite that. Too sensitive a pride. I'm not a betting man, but I think I would put my money on John Gurney were he ever involved in what is called a tight corner."

XIV

IT was not by chance that quite a number of people turned up to watch the Rev. John Gurney's lads play the lads of Willowwell. Mrs. Richmond was there, and both her husband and son contrived to spare half an hour. Mr. Slade attended to watch his grandson's prowess, and prowess it was to be, for George caught the Willowwell "Terror" in the slips, a hot catch, but he held it. Mr. Slade's daughter sat beside Mr. Slade, and saw her poor little man's side play their best game of the season. Willowwell were a formidable eleven, and Willow was their Symbol, and the Rev. Reginald Stout led them, and Mr. Stout was a great smiter. Tradition allowed a mature captain to lead the sides, but Gurney looked like a slip of a boy beside that bearded Norse hero, Mr. Reggie Stout. Gurney was not quite himself, and perhaps for that reason his right arm took charge and bowled with subconscious cunning. At all events he put Mr. Stout out with a googly when Mr. Stout's score stood at thirteen.

Willowwell were dismissed for 73, and Willowwell took the field. Gurney, sending out his first two batsmen to the wicket, seemed to avoid a particular pair of eyes. He could congratulate the son upon that catch, but he was shy of the boy's mother. He went and sat among his lads on the grass in front of the marquee,

and while appearing to watch the game, became lost in sensitive forebodings. What would youth think of him when it came to know that he had been accused of lechery with his own wife! It would be the town's summer joke.

Things were not going well for the lads of Southfleet. Two wickets fell for nine runs. Mr. Stout was the demon bowler. Gurney was sitting in doleful self-absorption when the voice appealed to him.

"You'd better go in, sir."

"What?" said Gurney, emerging from his sensitive stupor.

"Go in, sir, and stop Mr. Stout."

His flock murmured at him, and Gurney smiled. How pleasant to be regarded as the champion against the fox.

"I will, after the next wicket. Now, Fred, England expects——"

Fred marched out rather cockily, and returned less cockily in three minutes, having been caught in the slips for two. Gurney was buckling on his pads. Things were looking serious, and it was no time for melancholy lucubration.

"Good luck, sir."

"Hit 'em for six, sir."

Gurney went forth to battle, feeling suddenly and somehow man. He was given centre, and faced Mr. Stout with a smile, and as though to advertise his recklessness he swiped Mr. Stout's first ball for a boundary. The Southfleet chorus cheered. That healthy whack appeared to set something loose in Gurney, a sudden devil-may-care madness. Almost he said: "Damn it, I can play this game. To blazes with all humbug. I'll show them." He did. He played fireworks with the bowling. He could do nothing wrong.

The Southfleet lads were exultant.

"Coo, look at that one!"

"Another boundary."

"Well 'it, sir, well 'it!"

George, who was squatting on the grass at his mother's feet, swayed to and fro on his little behind in a state of ecstasy.

"That's forty-three! Oo, there goes another!"

The mother looked down at her son. How the young did fidget! And Mr. Slade looked at his daughter.

"Well, what do you think of our poor little man?"

Mrs. Hallard smiled the shadow of a smile.

"He has——"

"Possibilities!"

Mrs. Hallard glanced rather sharply at her father. Even fathers, and beloved fathers, had no right to be ironic when your secret self was walking in some secret place and laughing—if kindly—at certain promptings.

The Rev. John Gurney had just hit the winning run, a nice little snick into the slips when the Rev. Egbert Jones and his wife appeared upon the scene. It was right and fitting that authority should countenance and encourage these lads who were parishioners in the making. At this moment these self-same lads were on their feet, throwing up caps, and cheering. Mr. Jones and his wife looked at each other. What did all this excitement mean? They entered the marquee, Mrs. Jones smiling and poking her chin right and left. On public occasions she behaved like Southfleet's royal person.

Mr. Slade rose to offer her a chair, and graciously she accepted it.

"What is all the excitement, Mr. Slade?"

"Mr. Gurney has just hit the winning run."

"Indeed!"

Mrs. Jones's smile seemed to freeze. How—impertinent of Gurney!

Women are spiteful, men malicious, and malice postulates some compensating sense of humour. Mrs. Egbert Jones lacked any sense of humour, though she smiled much and displayed many teeth. Unkind people called her smile a grin. But that is as it may be. Now, Mrs. Jones discovered in this cricket business an opportunity to be shocked and to blame, and such occasions were frequent. When the game was over, and Gurney walked

back with Mr. Stout, carrying his bat, his lads rushed out and gathered round him, and attended him in loud and happy triumph to the marquee. Never did they gather round the Rev. Egbert in that familiar and eager way, and Mrs. Jones, squinting through her pince-nez, was offended. She discovered a nice and convenient grievance against Mr. Gurney, a moral grievance. Surely, a man and a clergyman who had been compelled to confess to a social scandal should not have appeared so publicly and so assertively, and with such crude applause. It was—indelicate—of Gurney. He should have bowed his head, gone into retreat for a season, and with humility accepted the shame of so disgraceful an involvement.

George had rushed out to meet the Master. Gurney was looking hot and happy. He had forgotten the prides and prejudices of the refined. He laid his hand on George's head as though blessing him, for George had not batted, yet was ready to forgive. Gurney had declared the innings closed, for the Rev. Reginald had whispered to him: "I say, old chap, I've got a sick soul to visit—urgent you know. Could you cut it short?" And Gurney had cut it short.

So did Mrs. Egbert Jones. She rose. She prodded her husband with the point of her parasol, for Mr. Jones had taken a chair beside Mrs. Hallard. He looked up at his wife, and her frown admonished him, also her glance in the direction of Gurney. Mr. Jones rose, with an "Excuse me." Emily would never allow him much conversation with a pretty woman, but on this occasion she was not denying him the beatitudes of beauty.

"I think—we—should be going, Egbert."

Mr. Jones looked slightly puzzled. But they'd only just arrived.

"Why, my dear?"

This was not the moment for argument. Mrs. Jones opened her parasol and walked out of the marquee and past Mr. Gurney and his mob of boys. From under the solemn shade of her green parasol she looked him in the face, and the light that filtered through the fabric gave to her countenance a tinge of green.

Gurney had begun to smile, but the smile died away. Why did the lady look so forbidding and haughty?

Mr. Slade stepped in among the boys.

"Well played, sir."

"Much too well played," said the buxom Mr. Stout, gazing with pleasure upon Mr. Slade's daughter. What was the matter with old Jones's Vinegar Pot? Mr. Stout, being healthy and hearty, preferred a honey-pot or a bowl of roses.

Mrs. Jones and her husband were processing towards the gate.

"What is the—trouble, my dear?"

Mrs. Jones gave him the kind of look a good woman gives to the unregenerate male.

"Surely, Egbert, you must have felt——"

"What, my dear?"

"The indelicacy, I might call it—indecency—of your curate masquerading in public—after—that—revelation."

"But, my dear, the man must——"

"I have always suspected Gurney of being incapable of nice feeling. Yes, to have married a woman of that description. Not the kind of man, Egbert, to have a good influence upon the young."

And suddenly Mr. Jones lost his temper. He could have exclaimed with Henry the Second: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

"Damn it, Emily, I am getting too much Gurney."

"Egbert! That vulgar word!"

"Well, upon my soul. I'm sick of the sound of the fellow's name."

"The remedy is obvious," said she. "Don't be weak, Egbert, don't be weak."

Mr. Jones muttered something that sounded very like "Oh, go to hell!"

One of our sages has defined humility as the self-effacing innocence of a man who is not conscious of feeling humble. The Rev. Egbert Jones, nagged at consistently by his wife, did

not become humble, but angrily resigned. It was useless to argue with Emily; she was a very stupid and persistent woman who misunderstood or misread your reasoning, and continued to assert that you had said that black was white. Mr. Jones might say to himself: "Oh, anything for peace," and retire among his chrysanthemums. He surrendered to what his wife described as a "Judgment of Solomon". Did it occur to Mr. Jones to wonder what Solomon would have made of Emily? Not a member of his harem! Tut-tut!

"I am firmly of the opinion, Egbert, that Gurney should not preach."

"Not—preach?"

"Certainly not, at any rate for a time. There should be a decent interlude. If he appears in the pulpit—I—shall walk out."

Mr. Jones concealed his inward exasperation.

"It means that I shall have to write two sermons."

"Your sermons are appreciated. Let Gurney understand that he should refrain for a time. If he has any—delicacy of feeling——"

"He may object."

"Well, then, Egbert, of course the problem will solve itself. Gurney will have a successor."

Mr. Jones lapsed into sarcasm. "Perhaps you would like to select him, Emily?"

"I think it would be quite a good idea."

The Rev. Egbert Jones might be jealous of his curate, but he had a soapy soul, and liked things done with unction. Moreover, Mr. Jones knew that Gurney was not without friends. He did not want any uproar in the parish. So, when the vicar approached Gurney on the problem of not preaching, he did it with a bland and paternal air, and as he supposed a father might speak to an unfortunate son. Mr. Jones could appear kind when kindness oiled the wheels.

The sensitive are much at the mercy of the thick or soapy-skinned, and when his vicar suggested with much solemnity to John Gurney that he should refrain from preaching for a period

Gurney felt accused of not having responded with sufficient niceness to the situation. He took Mr. Jones's paternal unction seriously. He sat and looked distressed. Had he been lacking in the finer delicacies of feeling, and failed to realize that his association with a tarnished woman left some tarnish upon him? He was allowed to play cricket but not to preach.

"Of course, sir, if you think that I——"

"I do, Gurney, I do. I think the congregation will understand that you have gone into—a short period of retreat. Verbal retreat, shall we call it?"

That was not a bad phrase from Mr. Jones. He sometimes wished that Emily would subscribe to some such ritual. Now, what would be Gurney's response? If he was not fit to preach for a season, if he was spiritually contaminated and should wash in Jordan, was he a fit person to serve in the parish? But Gurney's humility was such that it baffled the plotters.

"I see your point of view, sir."

"I am very glad to hear it, Gurney. You see, a priest, like Cæsar's wife——"

Gurney was looking over the top of Mr. Jones's head at an engraving of Christ hanging on the Cross. It seemed to him significant and symbolical.

"I will meet your wishes, sir. Do you think I am a fit person to administer the Holy Sacrament?"

This was somewhat of a poser for Mr. Jones. He suspected irony, but no irony was there.

"No—hum, I—well—we are vehicles, Gurney, channels through which the Spirit passes. I think you can be admitted to that Sacrament."

Gurney smiled faintly. It did not occur to him to ask at this moment why it should be right for him to administer the body and blood of God, and not preach Him from the pulpit.

Mrs. Jones was listening outside the study door. She was that sort of woman, but she could not quite distinguish all that was said, for Gurney's voice was subdued and quiet. She heard her husband's tones of solemn benediction as he gave Gurney to

understand that the ordeal was over, and that he was grateful for Gurney's co-operation. Mrs. Jones slid away and across the hall into the drawing-room, under the impression that her husband had dismissed his curate.

She squinted brightly up at him with much showing of the teeth. A tuft of hair had escaped from the tight bun at the back of her head.

"Well, that's a relief, Egbert."

"What, my dear?"

"He's going, isn't he?"

Mr. Jones gazed at that tuft of hair. He did wish that Emily would cultivate more personal charm, as well as inward virtue.

"No. He saw my point of view. Really, I think that Gurney has behaved to me with——"

"He promised not to preach?"

"For a period. As I was saying, Emily, I think that Gurney has behaved—very—considerately. I——"

Then Mrs. Jones said a very characteristic thing. "Sly little rat. I know why he——"

Her husband looked shocked. "My dear, I think that is a very unjust remark, and a very—uncultured one."

Mrs. Jones twitched her shoulders. "I—do—not stand corrected. I have good reason to suspect——"

But Mr. Jones showed temper. "If I may say so, you have a strangely suspicious mind, my dear."

"I? Well, really! If you are so short-sighted, Egbert——"

"You wish to supply the spectacles? I don't need to wear them."

And Mr. Jones walked out of the room and went to be soothed by his chrysanthemums. Really, if Emily went on much more like this he would find himself becoming a defender of Gurney.

John Gurney passed along Caroline Terrace to the cliffs. Cliffs they were not in any rocky sense, but a jumble of earthen walls and slopes and gullies, shaggy with gorse and brambles, and rough turf. Here and there, in some bank where the soil had

slipped, yellowish boulders lay exposed, suggesting skulls. There were many secret places here, secure from the crowd, where a man could sit or stretch himself, and stare at the sky or the sea, or close his eyes and dream. Gurney found some such spot, and lying flat in a most unclerical abandonment, watched the white clouds sailing.

There were moments when he wanted to be a boy again, and at this moment he was a boy again. He was one with the dead, those two dear people who had died too soon. He liked to think of the way his mother used to sit, with her birdlike head and eyes, and her little elusive smile that came and went. She had suffered much—had his mother, and even as a child, John Gurney had confronted the problem of pain. Why pain? Why those agonies of the flesh and of the spirit? Was pain like some cleansing acid that ate the pride and prejudices and vanities out of you? Strange, that from pain there should come peace! This was not mere sentimentality, for there were moments when John Gurney experienced a mysterious sense of continuity. Nothing died, nothing was dead. His mother was still there, sitting in her chair. Everything linked up. The past was just a series of pictures, live pictures which you had passed by in the great gallery of life, but you could return to them. Nothing was dead. Old savours, old scents, old scenes were as alive as ever, especially so if you could become as a child and discover in reality the eternal mystery.

Peace came to Gurney. He was with his mother, and not in the dreadful, Freudian sense. Gurney, the simpleton, was so much wiser than the wise. He was not troubled now by the Egberts and Emilies, the Sawkinses and Florences. Some serene essence in him smiled at these imperfect humanities. They were just a part of life. You got up and walked on, conscious of that other something in you, and of all the lovely things that mattered, beauty, simplicity, sincerity, the eyes of a dog, the laughing face of a boy. Yes, and of that other face. But did she understand? Though there might be pain, exquisite pain in not understanding.

"Perhaps she will think me a feeble little fellow?"

But was it feebleness to accept malice and to transcend it and to say: "They are but children—as I am, and wayward, naughty children, but in the heart of a child there should be hope."

XV

GURNEY arrived at the top of the cliff. He had not followed any orthodox path, but scrambled like a boy up grassy banks and crumbling, earthy ledges. He had slipped up one of these ledges, and the knees of his black trousers had gathered mother earth. His hat was on the back of his head, and a streak of hair across his forehead; and like a boy he stood upon the cliff-top, a little flushed and untidy, yet concerned about the state of his trousers. He bent down to dust away the soil, but it was moist and adhesive, and he had to call upon his handkerchief.

Thus it was that she saw him, before he saw her. She had been sitting less than ten yards away on a green seat with nothing but the cliff-edge, the sea and the sky before her, and suddenly that most unexpected figure had scrambled into view. He was looking at his knees, rubbing at them. How casual and young of him! How boyish, to climb when the conventional path would have served. Then it was that illumination came to her. She sat very still, vividly still in a glow of comprehension, her hands lying idle in her lap. Of course! Why had she not divined it before? Here was the essential boy, the man-boy in all its implications, its generosities, its impulses, its simplicities, and also its multitudinous complexities. His very tragedy, if it could be called a tragedy, had been part of his boyishness, a romantic rescue, just woman as he had seen her and as she was not, the young quixote not yet man.

And suddenly she understood or felt that she understood. A strange tenderness seemed to stir her like a child in the womb. She could laugh at him, but with sweet humour, and such laughter could make that which was laughed at more lovable. Boy John Gurney, but with no loutish arrogance, suddenly dismayed and as suddenly mischievous. He was looking at her now with a kind of frank dismay. He had been caught like a boy climbing an apple tree.

"Oh, excuse me——"

And she laughed, with him but not at him. All her aloofness seemed to melt away. She had no fear of his foolishness. She could say just what came into her heart or head. And how comforting and joyous was that!

"Your poor trousers! You ought to take more care of them."

Just that, and as she might have said it to George, a little reproachfully, yet with a laughing compassion, and a comprehension of the thoughtlessness of boys and men.

Gurney, handkerchief in hand, stood and stared at her, so stricken by the assault of his surprise that he forgot to raise his hat. Almost, she could have said to him: "Put your hat straight, my dear. And that tuft of hair." She just sat and smiled and said nothing.

Gurney came out of his stare. He put his handkerchief away, and glanced again at his trousers.

"Yes, careless of me, wasn't it?"

"Very. But why did you come up that way?"

"Why? Well, I really don't know. Just because I felt like it."

She looked beyond him at the sea.

"Felt like it? Yes, one does. And perhaps it's the best of reasons."

As a woman she understood that. She was not the precise male, measuring out, analysing, boring humanity with tables of statistics.

"Do you think it is a good reason?"

"What better? I see a cherry, I feel I want to eat cherries; I do eat cherries."

He looked at her as though he thought her the most wonderful person in the world, and her words, words of the profoundest wisdom, which, in a sense, they were.

"Well—er—yes. There are so many things one would like, but——"

"Do you always say 'no' to yourself?"

His glance seemed to go inward. What was his inward self saying? "I want to sit on the seat with her."

"No," and he went and sat on the seat, took off his hat, and showed the full length of that forelock. Like his smile, it was somehow attractive.

"Do you mind?"

"Why should I mind?"

He had no answer to that. He looked at the sea, and found his lips uttering that which he had not thought of saying. It just came out.

"I have been—listening—to Mr. Jones."

"We—all—do that, don't we? Did you like it?"

"Not very much."

"Nor do we."

He gave her a sudden, elfish look. "Well, I'm afraid you will have to. He persuaded me not to preach."

"Not preach?"

"Yes."

"Not—ever?"

"No, only for a time. You see—I don't know whether you——"

"I know a little."

"Ah, your father. I asked him to. He is a most wise man, your father. You know, Mrs. Hallard, there are some people who carry the peace of God about with them."

"I do know that. So, you climbed up the cliff because——"

There was sudden laughter in his eyes.

"Perhaps that was it, because I couldn't climb into the pulpit!"

There was silence between them for a minute, one of those silences that are like deep water over which two little ships may

drift nearer to each other. Gurney looked at the sea, and he looked at his hat, and a voice within him said: "Why don't you talk to her about it?" And she was saying to herself: "Shall I ask him to tell me?" So, when Gurney made up his mind, which was, after all, like withdrawing a bolt from the door of a natural impulse, she was ready and expectant.

"I don't know whether I ought to talk about myself."

She smiled at him. "Most people do it—without thinking."

How apt she was! Gurney turned his hat over and looked at the lining. It was a very old hat.

"Someone once told me that when a man wanted to begin a confession he would—try to create sympathy—by saying that his wife did not understand him. Is that so?"

"In my experience—yes, and a rather mean method."

"Oh, I agree, I agree. I wasn't going to say that. What I was going to say was, that I did not understand the woman I married."

"You dear innocent!" thought she.

Gurney turned his hat over again, and brushed some dust from the brim. "Yes, it was my fault."

"You take the blame?"

"I do. I did my wife an injustice in marrying her."

"But you did not think so at the time."

"No, of course not. You see, I was very young."

She smiled over him and his ingenuous candour. Very young! And was he not still very much in that state?

"Did your wife see it in that way?"

"I really don't quite know. We were so different. I ought to have realized that. I was a little older than she was."

There was a touch of tenderness in her inward laughter. He—older than Eve, older than nature! And what a John he was!

Well, he had told her, and it had been no plunge into icy water. Some of his shyness had disappeared, but his strange humility remained. He said that Florence's exuberant fleshliness had made life very difficult for him, and that he had hoped that some day—— Poor lamb, well, no wonder! No, he had not been a believer in divorce. Marriage was a sacrament.

"Even when it is—hopeless?" she asked him.

He rubbed at his hat. "Well, perhaps there are cases——"

"I divorced my husband. You know that?"

"Yes."

"His—was a hopeless case. And I had the boy. But, tell me; don't you feel that Mr. Jones's attitude is a little unjust?"

He looked at her and shook his head. "No. Mr. Jones is, I think, a stickler for—what shall I call it?"

"Appearances."

"Perhaps a little more than that. I suppose that a man in my position cannot afford tarnish. Or—ridicule."

"Not ridicule—surely?"

"I am afraid so. I am not wholly without experience of my fellow-men."

She sat gazing at the sea. What a strange amalgam he was of simplicity and shrewdness. But was not life a complex affair when you chose to regard it as something more subtle than a human zoo? There might be several selves in you, not one. Only the very old and wise and kindly—like her father—might be able to assimilate those warring selves into one harmonious whole.

And then he asked her a sudden question. "You won't mind my going on being friends with George?"

That startled her, and she was hurt for his sake. "Mind? Of course not. You are just the man I would choose—for my boy."

Was there a jauntiness about the set of Gurney's hat, a gaillard lift of the head as he went upon his way? Maybe there was. So, he was just the man she would choose for her boy! Oh, lovely words! Well, and if for her boy——? But that was beyond dreams. No matter, she had given him a badge of honour, and old Sawkins and his crowd could go to Jericho and find no compassionate Rahab there. Tut-tut! As for the Rev. Egbert and his Emily they were no more than social bumble-bees. Gurney was walking almost with the suave, Golightly prance, and then —he ran into Miss Godbold.

She covered the path. She had a commiserating face. She

planted herself at the foot of Gurney's particular cross, but not as adoring woman. She had a little debt to pay.

"Oh, Mr. Gurney, I do sympathize with you."

Gurney looked puzzled. "I beg your pardon. But—why?"

"Such a skeleton in your poor cupboard. Do you think I could assist in——?"

Gurney assumed utter innocence. "What, in cleaning the cupboard?"

"That—in a sense—was my meaning. I have had some experience of fallen women."

Gurney looked shocked. "Miss Godbold, you surprise me. Is it possible that—you—were ever a member of the—profession?"

"Sir!"

Her bladder of a face looked so like bursting that Gurney lifted his hat and hurried on. Had the mantle of Mr. Slade been laid upon him? He found himself repeating the old nursery rhyme.

"Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard
To get her poor dog a bone.
But when she got there
The cupboard was bare——"

In his inadvertence Gurney nearly collided with a lamp-post.

"You silly ass," said he. But to whom was an apology due, to Miss Godbold, the lamp-post, or the dog?

Yet, Southfleet was to surprise and perhaps to sadden Gurney in its various reactions to his unfortunate marriage. The story spread, Sawkins & Co. saw to that, and in the passing from door to door, drawing-room to drawing-room, pub to pub, became amplified and distorted. The most prevalent variant was that Gurney had married a prostitute. Well, really! For, Southfleet was still in long skirts and showing no calves, and though the emancipation was very near, a slipping seat in the sex-saddle was

still the supreme sin. An odour of stale fish attached itself suddenly to Mr. Gurney's reputation. It did not matter how, when or why he had married the woman. He was wedded to a harlot, and the implications were obvious.

The saint, at some period in his life, had been seduced by the serpent. Now, how could you get over that? A man who could mix with that sort of woman could not be received with confidence into Christian homes. Miss Godbold and her ilk had a lovely, slimy scandal to play with. Could hands that had fondled a prostitute be fit to administer the Holy Sacrament? Miss Godbold and her friends had very strong views upon the matter, and they carried their prejudices to Mrs. Egbert Jones, who was in severe sympathy with them.

Mrs. Jones nagged her husband. "You must realize, Egbert, that there is a very strong feeling in the parish."

Mr. Jones had suffered such lingual chastisement for years, but whether it was his digestion or his philosophy that were wearing thin under perpetual doses of vinegar, the fact remains that Mr. Jones was growing vulgarly rebellious.

Damn all these old women, why couldn't they let a fellow alone? Chrysanthemums did not pump piety at you. So Mr. Jones began to lose his temper with his possessive and interfering spouse and to snub her, which was rather late in the day. Mr. Jones either should have begun snubbing Emily on their honeymoon; or better still—he should not have married her.

"Will you kindly understand, my dear, that I prefer to run my parish in my own way."

Hoity-toity! Mrs. Jones had an irritating way of ignoring what was said to her, and of repeating her own statement.

"There is a very strong feeling in the parish, Egbert."

"So you said a minute ago. I am neither deaf nor senile."

"This feeling——"

Mr. Jones took up the morning paper, and retired behind it. What execrable manners!

"Egbert, when I am speaking——"

"Are you still speaking?"

"Please put that paper down."

Mr. Jones did not put the paper down. He went on reading it, and he ignored all the remarks his wife chose to make.

Her last words contained an ultimatum. "If you don't put that paper down, Egbert——"

Mr. Jones became almost Slade. "I beg your pardon, Emily. Did you speak?"

"Egbert!"

Mr. Jones got up, and humming a popular tune, walked out of the room with the paper, and retiring to the conservatory and his chrysanthemums, locked the door on the inside. He kept a basket chair in the conservatory, and he sat down in it. Would Emily follow him? She did. He saw her mouthing at him through the glass. He ignored her. Damn it, if Gurney *had* married a prostitute, there were other women who could almost persuade you that Juanry was a virtue.

Mr. Slade was very much alive to the situation. A part of Southfleet had its nose in the air, and Mr. Slade and certain of his associates became active. Gurney and Mr. Slade were seen much in company; Gurney and George and George's mother walked on the pier together. Gurney was seen taking tea with Mrs. Richmond on her balcony, and this flagrant flouting of morality produced an incident that was provoked by Miss Godbold. Miss Godbold's ethical impertinence was beyond belief.

The ladies met in Caroline Gardens.

Said Miss Godbold with great unction: "Dear Mrs. Richmond, I wish you wouldn't do it!"

"Do what?"

"Give countenance to hypocrisy. I can only presume that you are ignorant of——"

And suddenly, Mrs. Richmond let out one of her delightful laughs.

"I am looking at you, Miss Godbold."

Now, what did she mean by that? Mrs. Richmond had walked on with a very definite air of detachment, and Miss Godbold

remained pondering those strange words. She could make nothing of them. Her consolation was that good-looking women whom men admired were usually frivolous fools.

XVI

ONE of the illusions which prevails among both the cynical and the sentimental is that some particular virtue is to be found in some particular stratum of society. Mr. Robert Smiles held that honesty and sincerity were the private possessions of the working classes. Mrs. Egbert Jones would have claimed them for her own clique. She was for ever declaiming against the slyness and the ingratitude of the poor. Ingratitude for what? Dr. Richmond, who knew human nature when both sick and well, would have smiled ironically over the class-superstition. Virtue, or whatever you chose to call it, was the halo about the head of some particular person, some singular individual, like his wife or Mr. Slade. He called them The Sensitive Plants, and the notion that they could be appreciated and understood by the common or garden cabbage amused him. Cabbages could be useful and worthy vegetables, decent growths, but they were very liable to be infested by caterpillars and they were offensive in old age. Dr. Richmond was a mystical realist. He was one of a crowd and yet separative, as most men who follow a subtle craft are apt to be. He had no illusions about the mass-mind. It could be admirable in many of its reactions, but it was swayed by crude sentiments and emotions. It was as fickle as the English weather. It expected so much, and in its obtuseness could give so little of those more exquisite things which are not cabbage.

So, poor Gurney was to be surprised by the loss of loyalty he was to suffer when a certain thing happened, Dr. Richmond not

at all so. It was the many who looked askance and gossiped about him at back doors, and were sure that he was no better than he should be. "Call himself a clergyman and a gentleman!" There was ridicule, the smugness of simplicity in the condemnation. Besides, there is some malicious pleasure to be obtained from catching a so-called gent with his trousers down. The cruder the person, the more facile and complacent is the apportionment of blame. Moreover, some of these good, simple souls may have felt that they had been fooled. Their little St. John had a tail, like the rest of them.

Gurney held a lads' class on Sunday afternoons, and on successive Sundays he missed one or two of the boys. When asking the very natural question: "Does anyone know why Thomas isn't here?" he became aware of a certain air of apologetic uneasiness. No one appeared able to answer the question. Gurney, meeting one of the absent boys carrying a basket in the High Street, stopped the lad.

"Have you deserted us, Charlie?"

Charlie looked flushed and awkward.

"Well, sir, no, sir, but my dad——"

"Your father?"

"Said I wasn't to come any more. Dad's gone chapel."

They parted, for Gurney, suddenly conscious of the implication, did not wish to press the question. The lad's embarrassment had hurt him. So, certain parents were of the opinion that he was not a proper person to mould the characters of the young.

But these desertions followed after a shocking thing had happened, though how Gurney, as a Christian, could have acted otherwise than he did his detractors did not pause to consider.

It happened on a Sunday. Gurney, who had grown a little shy of congregational faces, or of some of them, kept his eyes more in the chancel of St. Jude's than of old. Certain of those faces were not friendly, and Gurney was feeling sore about a series of affronts that he had received. They were dumb accu-

sations, not vocal. People passed him by. It appeared that he had become a person whom certain of his parishioners did not wish to meet. He had surprised rude and surreptitious smirks on the faces of working-men. He had heard guffaws after he had passed, and remarks which he had felt to be exchanges of crude humour. Now, on this morning Gurney walked to the lectern to read the first lesson, and glancing for a moment at the faces below him saw a particular and astonishing face, that of his wife.

Florence!

For two seconds or so he was voiceless. Was this a terrible hallucination? It was not. Florence was smiling at him, and Gurney dropped his eyes, and stumbled into the first lesson. He held on to the lectern. He heard a voice reading; he supposed it was his voice. He came to a difficult passage and fumbled at it. Good God, was he going to break down? He pulled himself together and concentrated upon the words, and almost he seemed to be spelling them out like a child engaged in a reading lesson. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

Florence in Southfleet! Florence in the third pew on his right and utterly visible between Mr. Golightly and Mr. Sprague, a very vivid Florence. Oh, much too vivid, with an impertinent little black hat with red roses in it sitting and smiling upon her too brilliant hair. One stupefied stare had absorbed all the details and the implications of her. Florence's complexion owed much to art. Her very blue eyes were bold and jocund. Almost Gurney could divine the smell of her. Was it patchouli? He had seen Mr. Sprague glance over a shoulder as though to discover whence some potent perfume emanated.

What did it mean? More important still, what was he to do?

Gurney staggered through the lesson. He gabbled it, and the congregation wondered. Gurney was not himself. His face looked white and pinched. And was that not perspiration on his forehead? Thank God, Mr. Jones was to read the second lesson. He would not have to stand again—full front—with Flo's luscious face making mock eyes at him. No, there was no malice in her eyes, but a kind of jocund, rallying friendliness which

might be worse. Gurney retired to his stall, and his legs shook under him. He had a dry mouth and a desperate consciousness of crisis.

What should he do? What did Florence intend him to do?

Gurney blundered with one of the prayers, and felt his vicar's eyes fixed upon him. Should he confess to Mr. Jones? Mr. Jones had been less censorious during the last few weeks, for Mr. Jones was feeling less competitive. Poor little Gurney! Mr. Jones was conscious of being once more the master in his own vineyard, and at heart he was a good-natured man.

Mr. Jones preached, but what the sermon was about Gurney had not the least idea. So far as he was concerned it was fragmental, adventitious noise, a mere voice declaiming. Gurney was tucked up in his stall, and shivering with emotional ague. For she was there, not Florence, but his dream-woman.

The inspiration came to him when the churchwardens and sidesmen marched up the aisle with the collecting plates and delivered them to the Rev. Egbert who had passed from pulpit to altar. It was Mr. Slade's face that rescued John Gurney from chaos and confusion. That serene old face had confronted storms and tempests and lived them down. Courage? Yes, that was it. To be the master of the meanness of your soul. Was he to show cowardice before all these people? The congregation was singing the last verse of the last hymn, and Gurney, who had been head-down and mute, burst suddenly into song.

Mr. Jones pronounced the benediction. The congregation was standing. The choir filed out, and as Gurney stood to take his place, he nodded and smiled at his wife. Mrs. Sprague, seeing that glance go past her, turned her head to look, and so did others. Had the Rev. John Gurney smiled at—that? Gurney paused outside the vestry door, and so brought his vicar to a standstill.

"Excuse me, sir, but my wife is in the church. Do you mind if I go—quickly?"

Mr. Jones's eyebrows went up. He had noticed a particular person. She had been too noticeable to be missed.

"Your wife, Gurney?"

"Yes, I did not know. It came as—— I know you will excuse me, sir."

"You wish to speak to her?"

"I do."

Mr. Jones's eyebrows had come down. He smiled, and his smile was kinder than he knew.

"Why, of course, Gurney. Take off your vestments."

Gurney's eyes thanked him. He hurried in, disrobed, and emerged in search of Florence, not thinking perhaps that he had been shedding other vestments, and that the vulgar world would see him naked.

The church had emptied itself, but Mrs. Gurney had remained, seated like Pagan Love and waiting for man. She was in very good odour with herself, and the perfume of her spread like a bowl full of violets. She smiled upon her husband, that broad-nosed, cherry-ripe smile. Her hands were gloved. She was not unlike one of Rossetti's women, sensuous and splendid, save that she had the fleshly humour that those dream-ladies lacked.

"Well, John, my dear."

"Florence, what are you doing here?"

"I am staying at the Royal George. D'you want to kiss me?"

Gurney did not.

"But, Florence——"

She put up her gloved hands.

"See—that? I'm becoming a respectable woman, John. Yes he's come down to brass-tacks and bed-knobs. And I've come down to talk it over."

"You mean——?"

"Our divorce, my dear. You'll be a sport, won't you?"

Gurney was holding his hat to his chest, and trying not to feel frightened. "Come, Florence, we can't talk here."

"Yes, it is a bit—stilted—isn't it. Let's get back to the hotel. You can meal with me. I'd like a glass of sherry after that sermon."

Gurney stood aside, and his wife rose with crepitations of

black silk, and before John Gurney had realized it she had taken his arm.

"Quite like old times, old lad. Wedding march and all that!"

Gurney saw the empty aisle and the porch door before him, a panel of light and publicity, terrifying light. Nor was that portal of publicity without a background. There were figures loitering outside. So, Southfleet had smelt—Florence!

Gurney put his chin up and recalled the face of Mr. Slade. If that seller of children's toys had flouted the prejudices of the pious, why not he? If the thing was to be done at all, let it be done gallantly and with valour. Mr. and Mrs. Gurney walked out into the sunlight to confront those expectant faces, the countenances of Mr. Sawkins, Miss Godbold and their supporters. Gurney put on his hat and took it off again to these dear people. He smiled upon them. He might have been leading out his bride.

"Good morning, Miss Godbold. Good morning, Mr. Sawkins." He even patted his wife's hand.

"Friends of mine, Florence."

Mrs. Gurney gave Mr. Sawkins her most brilliant Leicester Square smile. Almost it said: "Hello, darling. Feeling like a little love to-night?"

Mr. Sawkins was not. The pair passed on, and Mr. Sawkins and Miss Godbold gazed upon each other.

"Well, of all the impudent——!"

Mr. Sawkins was biting his beard. It was the same lady, and Gurney had not lied about his wife.

"Nice business," said Mr. Sawkins.

Miss Godbold made a clucking noise.

"Disgraceful! How dared that woman enter the house of God!"

Gurney's friends were not in evidence, and he was glad of it. He preferred to make this fatal pilgrimage alone, and perhaps he had never felt more alone than when walking to the Royal George arm in arm with Florence. How near one could be to a person in the flesh, and how remote in the spirit! But Gurney

kept his head up, and looked Southfleet in the face. It was astonishing how much of Southfleet was there to be confronted. So, they came to the white portico of The Royal George, and entered, and were met by old Joseph, the head waiter, napkin on arm, and with a face that was changeless in its gravity whatever strange things life might usher in. It was said of Joseph that had an elephant walked into the hotel, Joseph would have met the beast with dry politeness.

"Good morning, sir. Lunching, sir? Table for one in the window. I'll get you a tub to sit on."

Florence smiled upon Joseph. "My husband is taking lunch with me. Two glasses of sherry in the lounge."

"Yes, madam."

"Dark sherry, none of your pale stuff."

"Two dark sherries, madam."

And Joseph carried his gravity to the bar, and there it burst like champagne that could not be contained. The Rev. John Gurney was lunching with his wife. Well, if anybody wanted to see life let 'em go and have a look at her.

The dining-room windows of the Royal George gave upon Caroline Terrace and the Gardens. A meal was a public occasion and passers-by could see the pseudo-fashionable folk who fancied the Royal George for a gay week-end lunching or dining in state. Joseph happened to have a window-table vacant and he presented it to Mr. and Mrs. Gurney, for assuredly they were worth displaying. Joseph's sense of humour was crusty and sometimes corked.

Gurney flinched but sat down. He would have preferred the dim deeps of the interior, for this window was so very naked, and Florence had ordered a bottle of claret. Southfleet would behold him drinking wine with Pagan Love. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound! Maybe the sherry had not been without its effect upon Gurney's courage.

"Well, here we are," said she. "I suppose you don't feel like calling me your Popsy Wopsy?"

"Did I ever, Florence?"

"Not you! But—he—does. He's in leather, and he has a villa on the river at Surbiton. We were through Boulter's Lock last Sunday."

Gurney spooned at his soup. "How old, Florence?"

"Forty-nine. He's nuts on me. His other one had religion. Suppose I'm a relief. Well, I've got to the age when I like my food and a comfy chair. Gosh, how I must have shocked you, poor little darling!"

Gurney gazed out of the window and saw the bright and freckled face of George. George was staring, and no wonder. Ye gods, fate might have spared him George, but Gurney smiled and nodded at the boy, and drowned his embarrassment in soup.

"So, you want to be free, Florence."

"Yes, darling. You'll be a sport, won't you?"

Gurney wiped his lips. "If you wish to live your life otherwise, I will."

"Well, that's common sense, isn't it. He's willing to do the right thing by me. After all, I was always crushed strawberry and not angel white. Born that way, I suppose. Got it from my dad, I guess."

"But your father, Florence——"

"Fooled you, did he? I tell you, my lad, my pa was as hot an old blackguard as ever took to the tiles, or wanted to and couldn't. That's what turned him sour, being a sidesman at Peckham and having to be respectable. Nasty old humbug he was."

"I wonder why you married me, Florence."

"Suppose I thought you rather sweet, and I was pretty sick of pa. Well, I'm sorry, my dear."

They had taken their table early, and other people began to gather for lunch, and as the room filled Gurney was made aware of a significant change in his wife's behaviour. Her voice became less loud, her manners more decorous. Florence was preparing for Surbitonian culture by being refined. And John Gurney was strangely moved to compassionate comprehension. Florence was

just the grown-up child, healthily greedy, capable of smearing her face with jam, vain, the complete little egoist, yet ready to put on manners and show off and become the perfect little lady. Well, well, would not God in His wisdom have given Florence her freedom to exploit gilded nuts and gold bedknobs? After all, what else could God have done?

"So, you want me to—institute——?"

Florence winked at him, and glanced meaningly at their neighbours. "Yes, John, if you will."

"Then I will, Florence."

"Thank you, my dear."

She beckoned to the waiter. "Waiter, we will have Pêche Melba."

"Yes, madam."

"And plenty of peach."

The Rev. Egbert Jones and his wife indulged in a most unsabbatarian altercation during the midday meal. The meat was lamb and tough, and so was the texture of Emily. She had been listening to Miss Godbold, and Miss Godbold had a peculiar knack of turning food sour in the stomach.

"I declare, Egbert, that—that—man must not enter our church again."

Mr. Jones was feeling exasperated, and not merely over the tough meat.

"And when, Emily, were you presented with the living?"

"I don't want sarcasm, Egbert. I insist on your engaging a new curate."

Mr. Jones laid down his knife and fork. "And—I—might insist, Emily, upon your engaging a new cook."

"Let me say at once, Egbert, that the household is my business."

"Well, my dear, why not attend to it more, and leave the parish to me?"

"Because you seem incapable of——"

"Eating tough mutton? I suggest most emphatically that you mind your own business, and leave Gurney to me."

This was rank rebellion.

"After—the impudent behaviour of that woman?"

"One might have some sympathy for Gurney. I think he showed moral courage."

"Moral courage, indeed! Well, I should like to see *you* show some moral courage."

Then, Mr. Jones said a disgraceful thing.

"Oh, shut up, woman, you give me indigestion."

And strange to say Mrs. Jones did shut up.

George trotted home to Sea View. Being in his Sunday clothes he should have walked sedately, but neither Mr. Slade nor his mother objected to his trotting on Sunday. The new dispensation was coming in, and very soon the first great German war would free women's legs from too much petticoat. George's toys were not put away on the Sabbath, nor was he forbidden to read R. L. Stevenson or Henty. Mr. Slade believed that if you squeezed human nature too much on one side it burst out on the other. Besides, there was plum tart and custard for lunch, and George was filled with other curiosities. Who was the strange-looking lady with whom Mr. Gurney was lunching at the Royal George?

George asked that question over his roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. His mother gave him a silent and considering look, and it was his grandfather who answered the question. He held that it was better to be frank with the young than to treat it to mumbo-jumbo.

"That was Mrs. Gurney, George."

George stared, with a piece of pudding on his fork. "I didn't know Mr. Gurney had a wife, grand-dad."

"Well, you know now, my dear."

George slipped the piece of pudding into his mouth, and while he masticated he appeared to cogitate.

"She doesn't look—like——"

"Like what, my dear?"

"A lady, grandpa."

Mr. Slade and his daughter exchanged glances. Mr. Slade felt posed, but the inspiration came to him.

"Things aren't always what they seem, George. I'm not a gentleman."

"Oh, yes, but you are, grand-dad."

"I keep a shop, my dear, and gentlemen don't keep shops."

"I don't care. You are a gentleman.'"

"Well, then, Mrs. Gurney may be a lady."

XVII

GURNEY, greatly daring, walked on the pier that afternoon with his wife. It was not a tactful act on the part of one who had been persuaded to institute proceedings for divorce, but sentiment held Gurney by the arm, and chattered and bored him. What a world it would be if everything was Florence, high-bosomed and perfumed and pornographic, full of shy artifice that, like a silk skirt, concealed an exhausting abundance of the flesh. But Gurney was feeling that he was saying good-bye to a creature for whom he had been somewhat responsible. As for old Rawlins, when he had seen Gurney pass through the turnstile with that wealth of femininity, old Rawlins had smacked his knee, and exulted.

"Gosh, well if—he—ain't got a goer! Shouldn't have thought it of 'im. That's the sort of bit I'd like to cuddle on a quiet seat after sunset."

Which goes to prove that old Rawlins's taste in women was not elevated, and that his opinion of Gurney as man had risen.

Gurney attended at St. Jude's Church that evening. He had had a few words in private with his vicar.

"If you would rather I was absent, sir——"

"My dear Gurney, I wish nothing of the kind."

"Thank you. That is—if I may say so—true charity and breadth of mind. My wife came here to ask me to divorce her."

"And shall you?"

"What would you advise?"

Mr. Jones had looked blandly benignant. He was going to rub in his victory over Emily.

"Well, Gurney, yes. I presume it will be a straight case. Not pleasant for you, I know. I should take what the Law will give you."

"I am glad you feel that way, sir. This tie has been an incubus upon me—for years."

Mr. Jones marched in to evening service feeling a magnanimous and fine fellow, and liking Gurney all the better, for Gurney was a figure in a triumphal procession. Mr. Jones kept an eye upon Emily. She did not walk out as did Miss Godbold, Mr. Sawkins and one or two others. Mrs. Jones was feeling an injured woman, but she remained shut up in the vicarage pew.

Gurney had said good-bye to his wife, and he found Mr. Slade waiting for him outside the porch. Gurney was glad of Mr. Slade, for here was a man to whom you could open your soul, and he was feeling lonely. Noisy exhibitionists like Florence drove your shy spirit to hide like a bird in a bush.

"We are expecting you to supper, John."

Gurney looked frightened. "Don't you think, sir, I——?"

"No, I don't, John, whatever you mean by that. You must have had a—tiring—day."

Mr. Slade took Gurney's arm as though to make sure of him, and to link up with him.

"Well, it's finished, and so am I."

"You—finished, John?"

Gurney smiled whimsically at nothing. "I'm either a sad sinner or a figure of fun. It is not seemly that I should stay on here."

Mr. Slade did not say "Fudge" or "Nonsense". He pressed his friend's arm.

"Some of us want you to stay."

"That's very kind of you."

"Any trouble with—Egbert?"

"No, Mr. Jones has been surprisingly considerate."

"Has he, indeed! I don't think he is a bad sort of man. Flabby and fearful, and vexed with a wife. May have made him more sympathetic. By Jove, I'll increase my Easter Offering!"

Mr. Slade's eyes were humorous.

"As for being a figure of fun, John, it has its advantages. You don't start on a pompous pedestal and get pushed over into the mud. For years, I suppose, I was a figure of fun. Silly old Slade! I even had to clean old Sawkins's boots. But now I'm cheeky."

Gurney glanced at the serene face and fine white head.

"Humour, sir?"

"Yes, John, laugh, chuckle, make a joke of life."

"A parson is not expected——"

"No, my lad, but how refreshing you would be. Cock an eye, smile at everybody, even tickle the old women. They might pretend to be shocked, but they'd like it."

Gurney reflected. "Perhaps I have been a little lacking in a sense of humour. By the way, I have agreed to divorce my wife."

Again Mr. Slade pressed Gurney's arm. "That's not exactly a laughing matter, but I'm glad of it. You'll be like a boy with a clean slate, John."

"What sort of picture shall I draw on it?"

"Just yourself, my lad, and don't think too much about it."

They found George curled up in a garden chair and reading *Treasure Island*. He uncurled himself when he saw his grandfather and Mr. Gurney at the gate. There was a curious solemnity about the boy. He went to meet Mr. Gurney, his frank and freckled face upturned, and he put out his hand with a childish gravity.

"I'm so glad you've come to supper, sir."

Gurney's eyes lit up. "Thank you, George."

"And mother's glad too."

Somehow this young candour and courtesy put fear out of

Gurney's heart. Was it true? It was true. He saw her pass out through a french window into the veranda; she waited for them there, her face in the shadow, her feet in the sunlight. Gurney looked at her and felt that to Mr. Slade's daughter he was no mere figure of fun, but man in his dignity and uprightness. He bent his head to her. A more romantic impulse would have moved him to kiss her hands.

"If I am trespassing, blame—your father.'"

She smiled at both of them. "I forgive you any trespass."

"All my trespasses? Then, I thank you."

The firm of Messrs. Grigson & Rogers undertook the necessary legal proceedings for the Rev. John Gurney. Mr. Grigson was dead, poor man, but Mr. Rogers served as a somewhat adequate successor, bland and calm and kind. It promised to be a straightforward case. Mr. Rogers cautioned Gurney as to his behaviour, for Gurney appeared to be an innocent and magnanimous soul, and ready to condone his wife's lapse in morals. It had been his fault for marrying poor Florence. Mr. Rogers warned Gurney against any contact with the lady. The case might be tried by a judge who had a passion for suspecting collusion.

"Of course you want it kept as quiet as possible, Gurney."

Gurney looked wistful. "Hushed up, you mean, sir? Well, I'm not afraid of the truth, but I don't want to be pilloried in the Press, if that is what you mean."

"That is what I *do* mean."

"And can you give me any idea of what it will cost?"

"Do you want damages against the co-respondent?"

"Damages? Oh, no. I have suffered no damage. It would be indecent."

Mr. Rogers smiled inwardly over this sweet innocent.

"Well, we shall get costs against him, though legal costs do not always quite cover the petitioner's expenses."

"So, I may have to find some money. I never seem to have much money, Mr. Rogers."

"I should not worry, Gurney. We shan't press you unduly. Meet your troubles as they come."

Those words might have been prophetic, for though the case was to be undefended, Gurney was to suffer what were to him painful humiliations. He would have to go into the witness-box. Oh, horrors! He stood there and gave his evidence, and was treated with humour and pity and trickles of contempt by the Great Man who was in a jocular mood. The judge made a Baa-Lamb of Gurney. The court tittered. They looked at the lady and the little parson, and the tableau was not productive of tears. Florence was dressed for the part, frail woman seeking security, but her flamboyance could not be and was not veiled. She gave the judge soft answers, and the jury glad-eyes. She accepted everything that was blameworthy, and excused her frailties by confessing to the unsuitability of her marriage.

Ye gods, yes! The court was in a laughing mood, and though its laughter flattered the Great Man's wit, it was hard on Gurney. He was, indeed, the day's figure of fun. How had this tame little fellow managed to get off with this highly-coloured and stoutly-sexed lady? The business of bedding-down must have been pure burlesque, the Variety Stage at its broadest. The court eyed Gurney with ironic and humorous pity. Poor, silly little ass! And Gurney, the sensitive plant, felt all these cabbages and cauliflowers and broad beans rocking on their stalks in rollicking enjoyment of his adventure in matrimony.

Moreover, the Press saw its opportunity. One of the new halfpenny dailies and a Sunday journal made hay of Gurney's matrimonial comedy. These gentlemen saw nothing but the comic picture of a little lamb attempting to satisfy the organic appetite of a fine and lusty lioness. The case was reported with some prominence in these papers. One headed it: "The Parson and The Pretty Lady". Gurney was presented with his freedom and his costs, but Southfleet was able to read all about its comic little curate and the bashful background of his marriage. The Press made a martyr of Gurney, without realizing that it might be flaying his secret soul. The case had been good copy, and

the vulgar liked to read of the follies of their so-called betters.

Mr. Sawkins read the papers and chortled. His shot might have missed the mark, but those chuckling paragraphs ought to finish Southfleet's little St. John.

Mr. Slade, when he read one paper, stuffed it angrily into the fire and trod it down with his boot. He did not wish either his daughter or his grandson to read such comic, sneering muck.

Mrs. Jones perused both papers, pince-nez on nose, and again attacked her Egbert on the issue.

"You can't keep the man after this, Egbert."

Mr. Jones said: "Oh, can't I? I stand by the cloth. Gurney may have made an ass of himself, but I'm not going to truckle to the halfpenny Press."

Miss Godbold purchased six copies of the Sunday rag, and distributed them to friends.

Dr. Richmond took Gurney out in his car on the country rounds.

Mr. Golightly persisted in presenting Gurney with his Sunday supper.

Mr. Slade enjoyed his morning walk with his friend, and once a week Gurney dined at Sea View, but there seemed to be no lover left in him. It had been laughed out of court.

But the unkindest cut that Gurney received, trivial though it might appear, was administered by the Misses Plimsoll. Miss Caroline appeared before Gurney, hands clasped, figure erect, lips compressed and austere. She presented herself and her sister as being grieved by the attitude they felt compelled to adopt, but they were agreed in requesting Gurney to vacate his rooms and go elsewhere.

Gurney did not protest or argue the point. There was no froth on his flagon, but this unkindness hurt him.

"Of course, Miss Plimsoll, if it is your wish, I will go elsewhere."

Miss Caroline, propped rather like a mummy against the door, gave him a faint inclination of the head.

"We have a—gentleman—in view. It would oblige us if you could make early arrangements."

Had there been some emphasis on the "Gentleman"?

"I will find other quarters as soon as possible. I presume that you will give me a day or two?"

Again, Miss Plimsoll inclined her head.

Maybe, Gurney's move was actuated by more than impulse, and that his consciousness of social unfitness persuaded him to go and dwell among the publicans and sinners. His adviser was old Rawlins, not a bad counsellor in such a crisis.

"Do you happen to know, Mr. Rawlins, of any lodgings in the Old Town?"

Mr. Rawlins did, and lodgings that were not presided over by a couple of old neuter cats.

"Sure, sir, there's Mrs. Cotgrove, sister-in-law to Mr. Slade's Eliza."

"A widow?"

"And one of the comfortable ones. Name of Polly, and she looks it."

"Not too—young?"

Mr. Rawlins chuckled. "Sixty if she's a day. Vine Cottage, by the Black Boy. And if I may say it you'll be among friends, sir."

Gurney went to interview Mrs. Cotgrove, who had been prepared for the visit by Mr. Rawlins. Mrs. Cotgrove was "Polly Peachum" at sixty, a comfortable, rosy, round-a-bout of a woman who should have worn a mob-cap. She had sent forth six children into the world with common sense and cleanliness, and she was missing her husband and was glad to have someone to do for. Moreover, she seemed to divine Gurney's need; he needed mothering.

"Come in, sir."

She was bright and talkative, but not too much so, for life had taught her that there were times when a man should be left alone. Tongue-prodding was a matrimonial mistake. Vine Cottage

was a little old red building tucked away beside the Black Boy's tea-garden, with a white trellised porch, and a very bright brass knocker. It too had a garden, and Mrs. Cotgrove cultivated that garden.

She showed Gurney a little sitting-room on the ground-floor and a bedroom above. They were clean, and possessed an atmosphere of naïve simplicity. Cotgrove photos were much in evidence, and sea-shells and wool mats. Mr. Cotgrove had owned a barge.

"They are not very big, sir."

"Nor am I, Mrs. Cotgrove."

She crinked up her apple-face at him. "You'll want me to cook for you?"

"If it would not be asking too much."

Mrs. Cotgrove considered him, and said to herself: "What you need, my son, is to ask a bit more. Too little may be worse than too much."

She turned to the window. "There's just one thing, sir, the Black Boy gardens. Just a bit noisy in summer with trippers and teas. No drunks, mind you. Mr. Childs don't stand any nonsense of that sort."

Gurney smiled. "Just people and children enjoying themselves?"

"That's about it, sir."

"I don't think I should be disturbed by people and children enjoying themselves."

So Gurney packed his bag, and carried it himself from the New Town to the Old, and even the carrying of his own bag was considered by those who witnessed it, to be a social lapse. Gentlemen did not carry things in public. Yet, Christ carried His Cross. The Misses Plimsoll had watched him pass out of the gate.

"Well, fancy him carrying his own bag!"

England was to need two wars to teach it simplicity and common sense.

When Gurney told Mr. Slade of his change of quarters and how it had been produced, Mr. Slade showed a certain acerbity.

"Do you mean they asked you to go, John?"

"Yes. They have a—gentleman—in view."

Then Mr. Slade put his head back and laughed, and there was irreverent joy in his laughter.

"Gentleman! And what are you, John?"

"Not quite anything, it seems."

"The damned old Pharisees! The gentleman. Oh, dear, why must a man wear spats and a gold watch-chain to be—such? And I'm a prime old cad."

"Then so am I, sir."

Gurney saw the joke and laughed, but during these difficult days his laughter was not what it should have been. He felt that people were laughing at him, and that he had to laugh rather wryly with them. There were even rude urchins in the Old Town who proposed to make a butt of the little curate, and rude urchins can have a devilish cunning in touching the sore spot. They waited for Gurney to emerge from Vine Cottage, and followed him, singing a certain popular song, with Gurney's name interpolated for "Daisy".

"Gurney, Gurney, give me your answer, do.
"I've gone crazy, all for the love of you."

Gurney coloured up, and tried to ignore the insult, but such aloofness did not discourage the rude children. It was Mr. Childs of The Black Boy who did that. He was a very large and potent person with a black beard and a mighty fist, and if there was any throwing-out needed Mr. Childs did it himself. And he was a Gurneyite, being shrewd, and of a warm and wholesome temper. Mr. Childs sallied out, and smacked heads.

"You stop that."

"Boo-hoo," snarled one urchin, "I'll send my dad to see you."

Mr. Childs smacked him again. "Right'o, my lad. Send your dad along."

But no dad dared to remonstrate with Mr. Childs, and the mocking of Gurney ceased from being easy fun.

XVIII

WHETHER it was because he was feeling somewhat sick in soul, or because a particular bug took a fancy to him, Gurney fell ill that winter. He took to his bed, and Mrs. Cotgrove mothered him, until a puzzled and grave Dr. Richmond took a serious view of the case. Had Gurney been eating oysters or shell-fish? He had not. But Dr. Richmond, after some days of deliberation, diagnosed a particularly insidious form of enteric, which appeared to be peculiar to Southfleet.

"The Cottage Hospital for you, Gurney."

"Hospital! But, doctor——"

"Enteric, commonly called typhoid fever. It is a brand that we get down here."

Gurney did not protest or ask questions. He was feeling a sad and a sick man. His head ached, and his bowels had turned to water. It seemed to him that he was experiencing yet one more failure in his obscure career.

"I'm in your hands, doctor."

"You are, my lad, and I don't mean to let go. You are wanted in this place."

"I—wanted?"

"Most certainly you are. Not in the Old Town, but in the new cads' quarter. But that's a future job for you. Your business is to give up just at present and be nursed."

Gurney lay and looked up with feverishly bright eyes at his doctor.

"If you would heal my—spirit, doctor."

Dr. Richmond laid a hand on one of Gurney's. "Does it need it? I shouldn't have said so."

"I'm a failure."

"Some of us don't think so. Besides, Gurney, I believe that one can only heal one's own soul. There are helps, of course."

"God seems to have deserted me," and Gurney turned his face away.

If the Rev. John Gurney was sick, so was the world of men. In spite of the theoretical idealists, those dangerous and deadly people, most men were absorbed in making money or in making war, or in both. The Devil's Cauldron was boiling up, and in it would be seethed thousands of livid corpses. Gurney was taken to the Cottage Hospital, a creation of Dr. Richmond's, and put to bed in a little private ward. The hands of his nurse were gentle, and he looked up at her with child's eyes, and apologized for the disgrace of his disease.

"I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

Nuisance, indeed!

"My dear," said the nurse, who was Irish, "your being a nuisance is my job."

But at the moment anything and everything worried Gurney. He felt so stupid and so heavy in the head, so weak in the belly. All the manhood seemed to have departed from him. Almost, he was like a woeful child.

"Doctor——"

"Yes, old man?"

"How much do I have to pay here? I've got only a pound or two in the bank."

"My dear fellow, don't worry your head about money. We'll settle all that for you."

"But I can't take all this kindness and not——"

"You'll take it just because it's a pleasure to some of us to give it. We are not mere—commercialists."

Meeting Mr. Slade, Dr. Richmond spoke to him of Gurney

"Poor Gurney's very down."

"Dangerously down?"

"I'm afraid so. More sick in soul than in body."

"He's not in danger, doctor?"

"No, I don't think so, if he wants to be well. Life has not treated him very kindly."

"Is he fit to see friends?"

"Yes. It might help him on."

Mr. Slade became active. He wrote a letter to George who was at school, and waylaid several of the lads whom Gurney had coached at cricket and in ethics. Did they know that Gurney was in the Cottage Hospital, dangerously ill? Yes, they had heard something about it. And done nothing about it? Oh well, they just hadn't thought, which is a failing peculiar to mediocre man. Mr. Slade did not indulge in irony and say: "Yes, you are quite ready to take, but you forget all about giving." What he *did* say was: "Why don't you go and inquire for him? Mr. Gurney has been very kind to you."

Mr. Slade sat daily for ten minutes beside Gurney's bed and talked of all the cheerful things he could think of, and looked for the seed he had sown to germinate. He brought a bunch of Christmas roses and made a joke of it.

"Guess who sent you those?"

Gurney gazed sadly at the flowers.

"A lady of the same name."

"How very kind of her to remember—me."

Mr. Slade's seed germinated. On the next visit he found a letter lying on Gurney's bed, and Gurney's eyes looked brighter.

"Hullo, had a letter?"

"Yes, from George. Dear Boy. Read it, sir."

Mr. Slade picked it up and read:

Dear Mr. Gurney,

I'm so awfully sorry to hear that you are ill. Do get well soon. It will soon be cricket, and we can't play cricket without you. I'm afraid I don't get on very well with algebra.—Etc.

Mr. Slade smiled over this very boyish epistle. Well done, George! Said just the right thing. Good boy! He would send him half a sovereign.

"Well, there you are, John. The most important thing in English history. Cricket. You can't get out of it."

Gurney smiled less sadly. "I am glad one boy wants me."

On the next visit Mr. Slade found Gurney in even better spirits. He was being allowed to eat thin bread and butter, and five of his lads had called to inquire for him.

But Mr. Slade or someone else was saving up the secret *elixir vitae* for him. Mr. Egbert Jones called twice a week, and was paternal and prosy, and feeling kind to John Gurney partly because he was no longer jealous of him. Poor little Gurney! Mr. Jones was not a bad sort of man, and feeling rather a fine fellow, for had not Gurney pressed him into playing Balaam's Ass to the bearded Emily? Yes, Emily—was—growing an incipient beard, and Egbert had remarked upon it. "You ought to have something done about it, my dear. I believe that adventitious hair can be——" Strange phenomena! Emily had burst into tears, and she had not wept for thirty years, at least not in Mr. Jones's presence.

"How unkind of you to call attention——"

"Well, my dear, I wanted to help. Would you care to borrow a razor?"

Which goes to show that Mr. Jones's adventures in psychology were not very profound.

But he had Emily's measure, and that of his curate, or he thought so, and he boomed benignantly at John Gurney.

"Perfect rest, my dear Gurney, perfect rest. Eliminate worry. You will soon be up and about again. Yes, I do admit that I am finding the work rather heavy without your assistance. Get well, my dear fellow, get well."

Mr. Golightly slid in now and again on oiled feet, and brought Gurney grapes, which he was allowed to eat if he spat out skins and the pips. There was an emollient virtue about Mr. Golightly. He was satin and silk, reassuring and bland. He did not always

say the right thing, but somehow his manner of saying it was what mattered.

"I trust and believe that all your troubles are behind you, Gurney. A peaceful interlude, what! Like shutting up the shop after Christmas. We shall all be glad to have you with us again."

Then came the day when the spring stole in and renewed the frosty eyes of winter, or that was how Gurney felt about it. The nurse announced the lovely intrusion.

"A lady to see you, Gurney."

"A lady?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hallard."

It appeared to the nurse that her patient blushed. Or, was it just the flush of weakness?

"Oh, nurse, am I—tidy?"

Well, such sensitiveness to appearances was a good sign. Gurney had been shaved, and he needed it daily, for there was virility in his black jowl, but his hair needed attention. The nurse brought a brush, and put Mr. Gurney's hair in order, and he submitted like a child. He was being allowed to sit up in bed now for an hour at a time.

"Thank you, nurse."

Gurney scrutinized his hands. Yes, they were clean hands. The nurse smiled over the shine in his eyes.

"Quite ready now, I think."

Gurney was smoothing down the collar of his pyjama jacket. Only recently had he given up wearing a night-shirt, for his night-shirts had gone to the rag-bag.

She—was there in the doorway, smiling at him, and the nurse closed the door. She was in black. Why was it that black became her so well, when the Emilies and the Godbolds looked dingy in it? A dark torch with a glowing head! Gurney sat and gazed at her. There seemed to be a strange stillness in the room, but he could feel his heart beating.

His lips were tremulous. They fumbled. "How—very—er—kind of you to come."

The vision moved. It sat down in the chair beside the bed. It spoke.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, much better."

Gurney appeared sunk in shyness, inarticulate shyness. He groped about for something to say.

"How is George?"

"I took him out on Wednesday."

"Did you?"

"He became very full of sausage roll, jam tart and ginger beer."

"Bless him," said Gurney.

"And I bought him a new bat."

"A new bat?"

"Yes, George is growing—in body and self-conceit. Apparently, the bat has to grow with the boy."

"Yes, of course it does."

"He sent you his love."

Gurney raised shy eyes to hers. He also was sending out love, but it did not get into words.

He was thinking of the day when he had scrambled up the cliff and found himself confronting her so unexpectedly. They had talked, and talking to her had seemed so easy—then. He had felt near to her, but now he was so oppressed by a sense of failure and futility that her very nearness caused him secret anguish. She seemed to him so impossibly fair and aloof, a creature from another world who deigned to come and sit by his poor bed.

Well, he could talk about the boy. "George doesn't seem to be very keen on algebra."

"Were you?"

"I? Well, no, not very. I'm afraid I haven't a mathematical mind."

"My capacity doesn't go beyond checking the weekly books. Anything imaginative, or poetry——"

"Appeals to you?"

"I was going to say that to you."

He looked perplexed; his thin, white face questioned a sudden impression. Why was she speaking to him of poetry, imaginative things?

"Poetry. Yes, and Shakespeare. Sometimes I feel rather like Hamlet."

"To be or not to be?"

He gave her a startled glance. "Yes, in a way."

"Why not—to be? It is possible, you know, for a woman to be in—that—quandary. Things happen and one wilts. One is all—not to be, life not worth while."

"You—have felt like that?"

"Oh, yes. Why not?"

He lay and gazed at her.

"Yes, I think I—understand. And it was—the boy?"

"Yes, the boy, and my father. It is rather the fashion to make fun of fathers."

"Your father is——"

"Rather unique. I grew away from my father and then grew back again. You see, I have a feeling, John, that life isn't all of one piece."

He lay and gazed. She had called him John.

"I'm afraid I'm talking too much."

"That could not be. But what you said just now."

"About life being not all of one piece?"

"Yes."

She sat, vaguely smiling.

"Well, is it? Shabby patches and splendid patches, and patience when we have to darn and mend. I had to pick up all sorts of frayed ends."

And suddenly Gurney put his hands to his face.

"Thank you for that. I—I was being—such a terrible coward. Things hurt. I felt——"

He did not see her face as she looked at him.

"Yes, things hurt. But they do not go on hurting. And I want you to go on playing cricket with George."

His hands sank to the bed. Then, he stretched out his right hand to her.

"Thank you—for that. Thank you—for new courage."

XIX

GURNEY lay and reflected, eyes closed, hands folded. His nurse, looking in on him, thought that he was asleep. But Gurney was very much awake inside himself, watching a panorama of his past, and possible pictures of the future.

Well, if he had made a fool of himself, what of it? All men made fools of themselves on occasions, some more so, some less, with the exception of such superior and dyspeptic old curmudgeons as the Sage of Chelsea. According to Carlyle the population of the world consisted of so many million souls, mostly fools, so that he—John Gurney—could claim brotherhood with the great majority. Did the world love the very complacent and superior people who never took a toss? Well, hardly so! You should get up and dust your breeches and refrain from whimpering. If you were bowled for a duck you could walk back smiling at yourself and the spectators. Sportsmanship, that good English tradition.

"Damn it," said Gurney, and was surprised at himself, "I have been like a querulous kid whose ears life has boxed. Why not laugh over it? If you can't do anything else—you can laugh."

Dr. Richmond, visiting his patient, found Gurney sitting up and writing a letter.

"Hullo, that's better."

"Much better," said Gurney.

Dr. Richmond considered him. Gurney had been so very much down, and now he appeared very much up, and almost perky. Could he take the credit to himself, or had some mysterious life-force bubbled up in his patient? Dr. Richmond, the wise physician, was shy of claiming too much credit for his craft.

In the dark house of the body the spirit of man carried a mysterious candle.

"Like a lightly-boiled egg?"

"Rather," said Gurney.

"Boiled egg it shall be."

"When can I get up, doctor?"

"Now, don't you be in too much of a hurry. You'll feel as weak as a cat."

"Why—a cat?"

And then, for some unexplainable reason, they both started laughing.

"Well, I don't know. Cats are supposed to have nine lives. Any explanation?"

Gurney looked coy. "I haven't had much experience of cats. My late landladies had one. They kept it in at night, or tried to. I used to hear the chorus in the back garden: 'George—George, come in, George, darling.'"

"Obviously—a Tom," said Dr. Richmond, "and did George come in?"

"Not always, I'm afraid."

"Well, that goes to prove that nature and cat-sense can be stronger than silly old women."

"I suppose——" said Gurney, and faltered.

"Out with it, my lad."

"That women can fuss too much, and that cats and men——"

"Quite so," said his doctor. "Half the women in the world never seem to learn that the best way to keep a man is to let him alone."

"Always, sir?"

"No, not quite always. There are occasions when the beast likes to have a sore head stroked, but only by the particular woman."

"Ah, yes," said Gurney, looking dreamy, "the particular woman."

From these occasions Gurney proceeded to get up with rapidity, and metaphorically to dust his breeches. He made coy

jokes to his Irish nurse, and even dared to tease the matron. Funny, but the women seemed to like it. Was it that he had taken life and himself too seriously, concentrated too much on the life that was to be and not on the life that was? After all, the present was the pathway to the future, and if the present was drear and dusty and without love and laughter, you might arrive at the Golden Gates looking rather dull and musty. And what would God say to you?

"Go back, my little prig, and learn to laugh. I don't like boiled-egg faces."

Had he been a prig? As a matter of fact he had not, but it is good and right that a man should ask himself that question.

Mrs. Polly Cotgrove came to see him. She looked so rosy and cheerful and completely wholesome that Gurney felt that it would be quite nice to kiss her. He did not kiss her, or even suggest such frivolity, but he did say: "Well, you do look well, Mrs. Cotgrove. It makes me feel better to look at you." Which saying seemed to please the lady, for she wriggled and tittered.

"Go on, sir, you are a—one. Well, we'll all be pleased to have you out and about again."

Late in March Gurney was back at Vine Cottage, and being fed up by Mrs. Cotgrove. Mr. Golightly had sent in a present of a case of stout and Mr. Slade a consignment of apples and oranges. Gurney was taking a tonic, but he discovered the most potent stimulus in being alive again, and in loitering and looking at things as he had failed to look at them before. This interlude appeared to have given him new vision, or a new self at the back of his eyes. Mr. Jones had said with heavy and paternal kindness: "Now, you just potter about for a fortnight, my dear fellow," and Gurney pottered about, and even saw differences in the Rev. Egbert Jones. He sat on sheltered seats and looked at the sea and the clouds and at people, at the little gardens of Caroline Terrace, at the fishing smacks sailing out from Hill Haven, at the sunsets, the bursting buds on the trees, blackbirds and thrushes foraging for their young. How was it that he felt more a part of this

multifarious world, and less persuaded to preach to it? Why preach unless you had something very urgent to say? And the urgent and secret things of the spirit seemed to prefer the silence within you.

Southfleet showed itself kinder to Gurney, but not with the kindness that a man might covet. Poor little man, he looked so spindly about the legs and big about the head, and his eyes appeared larger than they should be. Southfleet's kindness condescended. It smiled somewhat patronizingly, like a titled lady, upon the little person or parson.

"And how are we to-day, Gurney? Better. Ah, that is excellent."

Gurney might be happy in his humility, but he was challenged by this stooping politeness. Was he a rather pathetic child who had to be taken notice of and have his head patted? Humility is all very well, but even humility likes to be recognized for what it is. If Southfleet had ceased to regard him as a Juan in a dog collar, need it reverse the verdict and treat him as something between a poor relation and a weak-minded child?

But the discovery which surprised Gurney most forcibly was that the members of the so-called working-classes were more patronizing to him than were their so-called betters. There was no humility here, none whatsoever. And Gurney wondered. Had he been mistaken about the common man? Was there something lacking in himself which made him appear poor stuff to these simple but by no means humble souls? He remembered the loutishness and the arrogance that he had striven to chasten in some of his lads, the way they would wrangle and shout over a contested catch at cricket, and it occurred to him that the ordinary man was but the lout grown older and somewhat tamed by necessity and the police.

And their wives?

Gurney had rather fancied himself to be *persona grata* in the cottages. But was he? Happening to overhear one of these ladies labelling him to a new neighbour, even his humility grew a little red about the ears.

"Funny little bit. No 'arm in 'im, though they do say 'is wife was a tart. Worthy little fellah in 'is way."

Worthy! What a word of contempt!

Did his one particular woman think of him as worthy?

So, Gurney groped his way gradually towards what should have been obvious, that the simple and the crude-minded are not necessarily the salt of the earth, or humble saints shining in ignorant splendour for the confounding of the rich. Yes, humbug. These people were children, and sometimes rather nasty and mannerless children, blown up with rude emotion, and spitting venom at each other and at you.

How foolish to assume that because a man dwelt in a little, yellow-brick hutch, and carried bricks up a ladder that he was a superior being to those rare and exceptional souls who were somehow endowed with more sensitiveness and understanding!

Gurney spoke of these problems to Mr. Slade, sitting on a sunny seat with him at the top of the cliff. He confessed to the suspicion that there must be some inadequacy in his own make-up, and that he was not capable of impressing his fellows.

"I must have mistaken my vocation."

Mr. Slade was gently amused. In the past he had found consolation in supplying toys to children, and had watched some of those self-same children grow up into very uninteresting specimens. The promise of childhood could end in smug mediocrity. Mr. Slade's philosophy had become more puckish. He accepted the frailties of man, and sought to find compensations in them. All men were sinners; the thing was to avoid the really nasty and septic sinners. Stupidity and self-complacency were to Mr. Slade the most repulsive of failings, and they walked hand in hand.

"My dear John, the thing is to try and remain benign."

Gurney cocked his head at that. "Benign? But doesn't that entail some feeling of superiority?"

"Maybe it does. And why not?"

"But the souls of all men are equal—before God."

"Perhaps. But as I see it the dogma must throw a good deal of strain on God's feelings of benignity."

Gurney smiled. Mr. Slade's irony did not offend him, for it was so smiling and simple.

"Then, if we grant the equality of souls we find ourselves in something of a dilemma, sir?"

"The devil of a dilemma," said Mr. Slade.

"You mean—one has to differentiate, in spite of——"

"John, my dear, we are all of us potential humbugs. We have to humbug ourselves—and others. You put a horse in blinkers to prevent him from shying. There are all sorts of things we can shy at, nasty things, imaginary things. As I see it, the business is to try and retain our good will, even to the selfish and the stupid. To spread good will, and not to spend too much time looking under the bed."

Gurney pondered those words. "My trouble seems to be, sir, that people do not want my good will."

"Oh, yes, they do, John, the right ones. To the rest you have got to be—master."

"Master?"

"A term that is growing rather out of fashion, especially so to the Smiles fraternity."

"It suggests—tyranny."

Mr. Slade smiled at him. "I'll ask you a question, John. Christ preached humility, did he not?"

"Yes."

"Yet—His disciples addressed Him as Master."

"Yes."

"Well, do you detect any unseemliness in their use of that title?"

Gurney looked bothered. "No, er—I can't say I do."

And Mr. Slade chuckled. "Well, think that over."

Gurney did think it over. He concentrated all his consciousness upon the Christ. He could suppose that Jesus of Nazareth had enjoyed no social advantages other than those shared by

His disciples. They had had equal opportunities, all of them simple men who had lived by the craft of their hands. And yet, setting the miraculous aside, there was something odd about it. The sayings of Christ had carried through the centuries, and other men had called Him Master.

And humility? It was not a virtue that appeared to impress the modern world. It did not pay; it did not produce dividends. What of the blustering Germans, and the building of Dreadnoughts, and the new arrogance of the road which the petrol engine had fathered. What of these rather unpleasant new citizens who were something in the City, and were polished to the point of greasiness, and whose very frock-coats seemed to swagger. Ostentation, proud flesh, a beefy or a sallow complacency. Was this not an advertising age? Did any company for the production of soap or toothbrushes stand before the world in a white shirt and humbly proclaim its product to be—"A poor thing but mine own"? Hardly so! It was an age of trumpet-blowing, bawling, gross overstatement. The very Press was beginning to run out of adjectives. Words had lost the ring of pure gold.

Gurney was troubled and perplexed. What room was there for humility in this blatant, huckstering community?

Was Mr. Slade one of the last of the Old Romans, and he—John Gurney—a pale little Galahad pursuing an illusion? What was this urge in him to be—not better than other men, but better than himself? Why conscience, why faith? What proof had he that what you did and said and thought mattered, and mattered supremely? None? And yet! Would it be possible for him to shoulder and bump his way to the trough, put both feet in it and guzzle? It would not. That might be a healthy and a natural urge, and the true piety of pigs, but somehow man was more than hog.

"No," said Gurney with childish ingenuousness, gazing at the sea, "I'm not a pig. Well, what am I?"

What was the answer? Was he just a man among men, but a little more sensitive and comprehending than the majority?

A little more honest, and both more courageous and more cowardly? Gurney had no idea, as he sat upon this seat, how these questions were to be answered for him in that pageantry of pain and pride and poltroonery which this power-worshipping world was about to stage. He did not see himself as a knight in shining armour, a little tin-pot Kaiser bristling with militant moustachios, and stimulating the bristles of the German Hog. He was just a rather lonely and lost little priest, wandering about the maze of his own seeming ineptitudes, and feeling very much a failure. Yes, somehow the virtue seemed to have gone out of him.

The Rev. Egbert Jones, benignant and patronizing, once more permitted him to enter the pulpit, and Gurney was hesitant and shy. The message had gone from him. What could he say to these placid and complacent people? He—a figure of fun! No one got up and walked out. Even Mr. Sawkins sat and listened with pawky condescension.

Mr. Sawkins could say: "A rotten sermon. The fellow can't preach. I expect we've tamed him."

Even Gurney's cricket was not what it had been. His bowling lacked its innocent cunning, and as a batsman he appeared to have lost his touch. He did not shine before the young. He was utterly out of form.

Was it the result of his illness, or of that soul sickness which hung about him? The sting and verve had gone from the game of life. Mr. Sawkins could gloat over the little man's strange ineptitude. Yes, they had darned well tamed him.

Gurney, walking back to the marquee one hot June day after being bowled for a duck, saw Mr. Slade and Mr. Slade's daughter sitting in that soothing shade. What of the Master? He had lost his mastery even with the bat. Did the world wish to condole with him?

"Hard luck, sir."

It wasn't luck. Gurney retreated to the back of the marquee and removed the pads that always looked too big for him. He

took off his cap and wiped his forehead. He wanted to go away, but the rest of the game could not be shirked. He looked at the backs of heads and shoulders, and then he stole almost stealthily towards the Slade chair, and stood there like a lost soul.

She turned shoulders and head, and looked up at him. She just smiled and said nothing. Now, how had she known that he was there behind her?

"Come and sit with us."

There were only two chairs, but the problem was solved by Mr. Slade and his daughter moving their chairs close together and edging each to one side.

"Not much space, John, but you are not Behemoth."

"But I shall be—making it uncomfortable for you."

"Well, try. Come along."

Gurney slipped round and sat down between them, with an arm over the back of each chair. How near these two precious people were to him. The human contact. And then he realized that he had his left arm almost resting upon her shoulders. The discovery threw him into naïve confusion.

"I beg your pardon. I——"

He made as though to withdraw that arm, but the three of them were so close together that the disentanglement was not easy. Mr. Slade twinkled.

"Why not leave it there?"

Gurney glanced anxiously at the daughter's face.

"I am so sorry. I didn't——"

She gave him a quick, sidelong glance, and her eyes were gentle, if amused. "I think it gives us more room - if you sit like that."

"Just as we are?"

"Yes, just as we are."

XX

THE Rev. Egbert Jones went yearly to Switzerland, where he took his holiday in mild mountaineering. It had been one of those occasions when he could escape from his Emily, for though Mrs. Jones wore a pork-pie hat with a feather in it, and carried an alpenstock, she did not dare the heights. But Mr. Jones was feeling very male. He had asserted his authority, named a new chrysanthemum, and proved himself right in the handling of Gurney. Gurney was showing himself to be quite a good little fellow, mild, not too eloquent in the pulpit, and less prone to display eccentricity in the distribution of dinners and shirts.

Mr. Jones was absent in Switzerland during that catastrophic July. Mr. Jones, like many Englishmen, could not or would not believe that a continental squabble about Serbia could interfere with a clerical holiday. Mr. Jones was not going to be jostled by truculent Teutons or excitable French. War? Nonsense! Mr. Jones was enjoying his table d'hôte dinner and half a bottle of claret after a peaceful scramble, when it was made known to him that the escape from an explosive Europe might be something of a scurry. So serious was the news and so gloomy was the Swiss *hôtelier* that Egbert and Emily bustled upstairs and packed in haste and perturbation.

The Rev. John Gurney was alone in the parish during that strange month in summer. He preached, he administered the Holy Sacraments, he visited, he played cricket. Southfleet appeared to be completely and complacently Southfleet. The East End swarmed into it, and sweated and drank much beer, and paddled and bathed, and went for sixpenny sails, and ate whelks and cockles soused in vinegar. Yet, Gurney was strangely fey. When consecrating the bread and the wine, the body and blood of God, he had a sudden, almost mystical fore-feeling of the horrors that were to be. Blood, yes, and torn flesh, and shattered souls. He did not read the news. He did not need to read it. Somehow, he knew that tragic things were about to happen

Gurney, going about his duties in this serene summer weather, marvelled at the crowds that filled Southfleet with the odour of warm humanity. You heard the murmur of their voices, one long continuous drone, and the shouts of the boatmen and the hucksters. "Now then, any more for the *Skylark*?" *Skylark!*—Southfleet was a Fun Fair. It paddled and bathed and ate and drank, and sat on the sands, and played concertinas and sang. In the evening it poured a black mass up Pier Hill and the High Street to the station. Tired children boo-hooed, and equally tired mothers grew peevish. Gurney was made to think of cattle droves, creatures with large and animal eyes, purblind as to the future.

He had a curious sense of standing like a spectator, observing the human scene, and sadly apart from it. These people were his people, and yet——? No, one could not be just a spectator. A strange unrest stirred in him. At night he would sometimes go and sit by the sea, if the tide was in, and listen to it, and watch the water come purling to his feet. Tranquil it might be, now that the crowds had gone, but not with the tranquillity of peace. It was a hushed voice speaking of the tragic things that were to happen.

George came home for the holidays, and Gurney went to Sea View on certain evenings to bowl George balls on his private garden-pitch. Mr. Slade would sit and watch them, and sometimes *she* would be there. There were moments when Gurney would become absent-minded. He would handle the ball and gaze at it as though seeing visions in a crystal.

"Is it coming unstitched, Mr. Gurney?" The boy's voice brought him to.

"Unstitched?"

George's freckled face was very serious. "Yes. You were——"

"Just thinking, that's all."

George grinned. "About bowling me a new sort of nasty one?"

Gurney grinned back. "Am I that sort of man?"

The night spread warm dark wings, and George went to his

bed. Gurney and Mr. Slade wandered out for a stroll on the cliffs, to watch the moon rise over the sea. Gurney was in a strange, fantastic mood in which the past and future joined mouth to tail like a symbolic serpent. He said that many strange ships had sailed upon that sea, Roman ships, Saxon ships, and how had the peaceful people felt when the long-boats of those bloody pirates had slid shorewards, ominous and black?

"I expect they took to their heels, John."

"Shall we?"

Mr. Slade glanced at him curiously, for Gurney's face looked dim and thin and visionary in the dusk.

"Feeling prophetic, John?"

Gurney said very quietly: "There is going to be war."

They were on the edge of the cliff, and the grass was as dry as a pile-carpet. Mr. Slade sat down, and Gurney squatted beside him. They were like a couple of boys with their knees drawn up to their chins. Between the gorse bushes they could see the dim estuary, and the lights of the pier, and the lights of ships going and coming. There was silence between them, the silence of sad and inscrutable things.

Then a voice near them said: "Give over, Bert. I'm not feeling like that yet."

Said Bert: "Love a duck, my girl, I've got to do it soon or blow up."

"And me with a kid—before——"

"Well, there'll be kids comin', won't there? You and me in a tight little 'ouse with a garden."

Gurney looked at Mr. Slade, and got quietly to his feet. Mr. Slade did likewise. They wandered off to another spot, and left the lovers to their passion-problem.

Said Gurney: "Poor young things! So sure of everything. No one seems to feel——"

"Have you turned Cassandra, John?"

Gurney gazed out to sea. "Lights, just like eyes. And so many of them will be closed. Lights going out everywhere."

This was a new phase to Mr. Slade, but he understood it

perhaps as no other soul in Southfleet would have understood it, save two or three women. This little visionary was uttering strange sayings, and most men might have mocked or misunderstood him, as they had mocked at Christ on the cross. "Little Gurney has the wind-up. Damn it, haven't we got the Navy?" The blue-eyed boys never see trouble till it is upon them, and then they blame—not themselves, but the politicians. Mr. Slade fingered his chin. Had he not found fantasy in a toy-shop, those moods of masquerading fancifulness, which leave most human cattle staring?

"You seem very sure, John?"

"I am, sir. Sometimes—we——"

"See ahead, not horse-sense—but God-sense."

"Perhaps that's it. Lights going out, and those that are left—all red."

Mr. Slade gazed at the lights of the pier, Southfleet's pride and symbol.

"Feeling responsible, somehow, John?"

"Yes. Strange things may happen to all of us."

How was it that when they re-entered the gate of Sea View and saw a dim white figure seated in the little house's veranda, Mr. Slade suddenly remembered that he had a letter to post, and left those two together? Mr. Slade took a devil of a time posting that letter. In fact he strolled down to the Old Town and savoured the lights and smells of humanity.

Said Gurney to Mrs. Hallard: "I'm glad George is so young."

Her sidelong glance begged the question.

"Why? Oh, well, because he won't be involved."

There was silence between them for some seconds.

"Do you really believe—that it will happen?"

"I do."

"Why should it?"

"I seem to feel a kind of madness in this new world. Something both brutal and fine that must out."

Her hands moved restlessly in her lap. "And you? Can it affect you?"

Gurney did not answer that question immediately. Then he said: "I have a feeling—like—being a child on the edge of a strange sea. I shall have to cross that sea."

Mr. and Mrs. Egbert Jones crossed it on a sweltering day at the beginning of August, with a crowd of other fugitives, all hot and tired, and mostly irritable. Many of them were minus their luggage, or portions of it, and Emily's trunk was missing, and so was the feather from her hat. Egbert had stood for hours in the crowded corridor of a train, while Emily slept in the corner of a third-class carriage. Paris had been pandemonium, or that is how they described it, a couple of *croissants* and two cups of scalding coffee.

"Why do these wretched French always lose their self-control?"

Thus spake Emily, who had lost her temper and did not retrieve it until she had been given tea on the Dover-London boat-train.

Egbert had been only too aware of the loss of that temper. All the ills of the holiday had been ascribed to him. Why must he go to Switzerland? Why must he go just when those beastly Germans were concocting a war? Why hadn't he foreseen the catastrophe? Mr. Jones stood up very well to this vituperation. He kept his temper inside a tired and hungry tummy, and managed to be kind and helpful to fellow-travellers. In fact, Mr. Jones behaved like a gentleman, and was paternal, if a little pompous. Why had he gone to Switzerland? Why didn't Emily go to the devil?

Tut-tut! Mr. Jones repressed such irritable impulses. He had a packet of chocolate on him, and Emily had the lot. Poor weak woman! Egbert, sagging with fatigue, heat and hunger in the crowded corridor, had thought of his dear chrysanthemums, and of the strange lapse of which he had been guilty. No plant had been christened Emily.

The Jones's reached Southfleet late in the afternoon, to drive homewards down a howling High Street. That was how it appeared to Mrs. Jones. Hadn't these people any sense of decency? Must they drink beer and sing when a horrible and vulgar war was imminent? Mrs. Jones's bun of hair looked untidy and distracted, and she squinted with condemnation at the crowd, so much so that when their cab was held up, an irreverent cockney, somehow sensing her hostility, grinned at her.

"'Allo, old gal, yer 'air's comin' darn."

Old girl indeed! But when the cab drove on Emily put up a hand to investigate her bun.

"Why do we live in such a vulgar place? The scum of London."

"My dear, pull yourself together. If these people can laugh—"

"Laugh! Now, when——"

Then Mr. Jones said a very vulgar thing. "It may be because they have—guts."

Almost it would seem that the gentlemanly Egbert was being prematurely infected by the coarseness and the broad and desperate horrors of the war. Dying men, and those about to die, can laugh, and perhaps must laugh, if there is good mongrel English blood in them. Mr. Jones was feeling pleased with himself, and in chanticleer mood. He had behaved rather well on that terrible journey. He had comforted women and children with a large and soapy kindness. Had not one little woman with soft brown eyes looked up at him at Calais and said: "Thank you for all your kindness." Ahem—Mr, Jones had felt a little romantic, in spite of his fatigue. And somehow he had given Emily a demonstration of fortitude and manly courage. He had been rather pleased with that phrase: "The country has guts." Though it would not sound seemly in a sermon.

So pleased was Egbert with this new and coarse virility that he used the word on Gurney.

"Guts, my dear Gurney, guts. This old country sees things through."

The Rev. Egbert became strenuously martial. "The Church

must make her voice heard, Gurney," and Mr. Jones preached a rousing and booming sermon. He let off the big guns. Almost he felt himself to be in uniform, a fine figure of the Church Militant. He had the Union Jack hoisted on the St. Jude's flagstaff. He gave solemn countenance to hot patriotism by taking the chair at Southfleet's first recruiting rally. He spoke solemnly of duty, the Englishman's home, defence and offence against tyrants. He held a special service of intercession. Emily was told that she should be active in promoting the growth of the local V.A.D.

"We may not be able to serve in the flesh, Gurney, but we can do so in the spirit. If I were a younger man I might almost feel tempted to shed the cloth and go crusading."

But Mr. Jones was fifty-three and comfortably secure. He could become bellicose in absolute safety, and perhaps he did not realize that younger men had qualms. They might have to march into the bloody arena, and surrendering everything, cry: "Those who may be about to die salute thee, oh Cæsar!" Mr. Jones was blessed in his immunity. He would not be separated even from his chrysanthemums.

Gurney felt things differently. Were not the flesh and the spirit subtly inseparable. Both might—and perhaps should—suffer in a mystical communion. "I bleed, both in body and soul." Was there not something sacramental in bodily service, personal surrender to the physical perils that other men would suffer? Even in the testing flame of fear the body and the spirit were indissolubly linked. Fear? John Gurney had not experienced it as yet in its crude, organic fierceness, that overwhelming urge that dries the mouth and blanches the skin and shakes man to his foundations, and yet—he had some knowledge of moral fear. But that might be so different. Mr. Jones might peal and thunder in security, but John Gurney could know the secret shame of not sharing death and disaster with others.

He was a very silent little man during those first few weeks. He had nothing to say upon the war. He was in no mood to preach upon it. How could you preach to other men upon it

when you yourself were outside it? He had no lead to give, because he was waiting for the choice that was to lead John Gurney.

He watched the lads gathered outside the recruiting office. He watched them marched away in their poor civies. They looked so young, and often so small. Their faces wore masks of fallacious brightness. Some of them had been his lads, and Gurney had no words of cheer for them. He was profoundly ill at ease, and mute.

He met Mr. Sawkins there. Mr. Sawkins was a hundred per cent Jingo. He could froth safely at the beard.

"By Jove, I wish I was thirty years younger!"

There was something nasty about this old dog's yapping. He even suggested that Gurney was pacifist. "Don't you wish you didn't have to wear a dog-collar, young man?"

"No, I don't."

"Ha, that's the way you feel about it, is it?"

"What I feel, sir, is my own affair."

"Fudge and nonsense. Every man should feel it his duty to serve."

Gurney was a little flushed. "And how do you propose to serve, Mr. Sawkins? Just by shouting?"

Impertinent little squirt! Mr. Sawkins chewed his beard. "Let me tell you that if I were thirty years younger, I'd be——"

Gurney turned away. There was something shameful in swapping sarcasms with Mr. Sawkins.

Then, came those dreadful days of defeat and imminent disaster. What an anti-climax after all the military music, the flag-waving, the oratory! Men felt that unpleasant dropping of the belly, the helplessness of futile lookers-on. It made them sweat and shiver in secret, while assuming the facial brightness of crackle-ice. Grim days, gloomy days. Thank God for the Navy! The holiday crowds were less black, and less noisy. Almost it seemed to Gurney that this little town had a strange hush upon it, and stood listening. Dr. Richmond, driving in his car, looked stern and grey, all profile. He had had trouble with Charles.

"Look here, pater, I'm sorry, but I can't go miking about here looking at tongues—while—that is going on."

"What do you want to do?"

"Fight."

Dr. Richmond had smiled gently at his son. "And waste your—special skill. You'll be wanted all right, my lad."

"But, damn it, I don't want to be a picker-up and a patcher. I want to fight."

"Have patience, my son. You may be in it more deeply and dangerously than you know."

Mr. Jones wore a very solemn face. The news was terrible. He pottered about among his chrysanthemums, and did so wish that he could christen one of them Victoria. Mr. Golightly's sprightly stride seemed to have lost some of its elasticity. Mr. Hawkins went about growling at his country's generals. Was it not notorious that all regular soldiers were hunting, dudish, haw-haw fools!

Gurney was very sad. This England—in anguish. Englishmen over yonder, beaten men, bloody-footed, unshaven, wild of eye. Blindly stumbling with hunger and fatigue. They were his men, his fellows. Would this terrible retreat never end? Could nothing stop these Germans?

Gurney took the tragedy to himself. "What can *I* do?" What *could* he do? Pray? Could prayer stop that menacing, marching infantry? Stay that sea of spiked helmets? But Gurney did pray. He went right down into the deeps of himself, and maybe it is God's plan that man should let a bucket down into those profundities and drink of the cold calm water of his own soul. Let a million men do such, and the Devil is confounded, and evil turned back from the gates of life and of death.

It was on a serene September evening when Gurney went down to the beach in the Old Town and chartered a rowing-boat from Tom Myall. The tide was in, and Tom Myall shoved him out into deep water, and Gurney got out the sculls.

"Be long, sir?"

"Oh, perhaps an hour."

"Right-o, sir. I'll be about. Can't sit at 'ome these days."

Gurney was not very proficient with the sculls, and Tom Myall watched him windmill and splash his way out towards the coming night. Queer little fish, this curate! Tom Myall crunched over the shingle to the sea-wall, and climbing the steps, made for his pub, in the hope of hearing some news. God blast those bloody Germans! If only someone could give them a knock.

Gurney paddled his way out over the placid water until Southfleet had become a row of dim house-faces. He wanted to be alone with the sea and the sky and that strange entity, his own soul. Then, he shipped his sculls and drifted. He watched the light die away over the water. He sat, cradled there, listening, looking. He had a most queer feeling that something was coming to him out of mysterious space.

It did come. Gurney's head went up like the head of a star-gazer. He listened. What strange, inward voice was speaking to him? Was it some supernatural voice using the soul of man?

"Be of good cheer. A wonderful thing is about to happen. There is victory in the air."

It was dark when Gurney sculled back to the beach. A rather worried Tom Myall was waiting there. Had the little fellow upset the boat and got himself drowned? As the black shape glided in, the boatman went forward to lay his hands on the bow and haul it up clear of the water. Gurney had shipped his sculls, but in a most unwaterman-like manner. And how had Gurney managed to strike the right portion of the beach?

"I was getting a bit worried about you, sir."

"Were you?" said Gurney. "I'm sorry. Everything's all right."

Tom Myall gave him a hand. "I wish the news was all right, sir."

"It is, Tom. How much do I owe you?"

Tom stared at Gurney. "Well, I was up at the pub, and there was nothin' to let off about."

"There will be, Tom. How much do I owe you?"

"Call it one and a tanner, sir."

Gurney groped and found what he thought was a shilling and six coppers, and paid the boatman.

"Good night, Tom."

"Good night, to you, sir."

Tom Myall watched Gurney climb the steps of the sea-wall. Funny little blob! What did he mean by everything being all right? Tom pulled the boat up and returned to the pub for another drink and also to discover that Gurney's shilling had turned into a halfpenny.

"Well I'm blowed! Have to see 'im about it to-morrow."

But when Tom Myall heard the news next day he kept the halfpenny for luck and surrendered the shilling.

Gurney went straight up Pier Hill, and along Caroline Terrace to the cliffs. He had the face of a visionary, and as such he came to Sea View, and passed in through the gate. The blinds were down and the windows lit, but someone was sitting in the veranda, and Gurney knew to whom he would utter that strange message.

"Is your father in?"

"Doing accounts."

Gurney took off his hat and passed a hand over his forehead.

"I have had news, good news."

She was leaning forward. "Good news. But the last communiqué——"

"Yes. But the news came to me. I was out in a boat. There has been a victory."

She looked up at him. "But—how——?"

"I don't know how. It just came to me. May I sit down with you?"

"Yes, John. Oh, how wonderful—if——"

"There is no 'if' Somehow I am sure."

His hand touched hers. Oh, wonderful night! John Gurney sat holding her hand.

XXI

SOMEONE spoke of the victory as "The Miracle of the Marne", and to Gurney it was as miraculous as the way the news of it had come to him. He did not question the prophetic voice. Had he not heard it, and been filled with a strange and profound peace and a feeling of exaltation? Assuredly, there were mysteries beyond the ken of man.

When Rose Hallard saw the news on the printed page, she sat and gazed abstractedly at the teapot, so much so that her father's attention was challenged. He had glanced at the paper before breakfast, and sworn that God and bacon and eggs were right with the world.

"Giving thanks, my dear?"

She came out of her stare, and smiled. "Yes. But, do you know—John foretold it."

"So John is a military expert!"

"Don't tease, father."

"Sorry, my dear."

"When you were doing accounts last night John came. He had been out alone in a boat, yes, in the darkness. And the news had come to him. He was quite sure."

Mr. Slade looked at her and then looked at his plate.

"Well, I don't question it. John may be among the prophets. After all, there are things we don't know about the souls of unusual men."

Down in the Old Town Tom Myall had a small crowd round him.

"I tell you 'e told me last night. Been out alone in *Ethel* in the dark. Worried I was. Thought he might have capsized. 'E's not good in a boat."

"Garn, tell us another, Tom."

"I am tellin' you. He came in and said there was nothin' to worry about, and that there'd been a victory."

"Who put 'im in the know? Someone in a yacht or barge might 'ave shouted it at 'im."

"Bloody likely!" said Tom. "There must be somethin' unusual about the little fellow."

"Call 'im a prophet, then!"

"What if I do? It takes some explainin'. Anyhow, I've kept 'is lucky 'alfpenny."

But plain men do not like the unexplainable, anything which offends their common sense, and Tom Myall's auditors mooched off as scoffers. Who was Gurney that he should know more about "the war" than they did? Why, the fellow had not had the sense to tell a respectable woman from a tart. All men are envious, and the complacency of the common man can be incredibly—complacent. Finding itself overshadowed, it may turn its back on the mountain.

"What, Mont Blanc? Never heard of the fellow. Give me a good blancmange!" And mounting his little facetious nag, the common man thinks he has jumped the Jungfrau.

The sprightliness returned to Mr. Golightly's walk. Mr. Jones, entering his conservatory with great solemnity, and a glass of water, gravely rechristened his latest—"Victoria"—baptizing her with full sacramental unction. Mr. Sawkins went about growling. He had been a prophet of gloom and he was peeved. But, after all, it was a French victory; the British Army, led by Huntin' Haw-Haws, had had little to do with it. Mr. Sawkins played the sceptic. He grizzled in his beard.

"I hope it's true. They may be making the best of a bad job. Wait and see what happens next."

Mr. Sawkins clicked his false teeth at foolish optimism, and rattled the old bones of the elderly ladies who dwelt in his hotel.

Mr. Jones was tying a label to Victoria when the maid came to say that Gurney was in the study.

"Ha, show him in here, Bessy."

Mr. Jones was in a genial mood. He beamed upon Gurney, and introduced him to Victoria.

"Rather—apposite, I think, Gurney. Victoria, and a lovely carmine."

Mr. Jones put two fingers behind a flower and displayed it.

"Perfect petals, perfect shape. May there be many such."

Gurney admired Victoria, though he preferred an English rose to this Japanese tam-o'-shanter.

"You must be very proud of it, sir."

"I am, Gurney, I am, though of course one should realize with true humility that one but tries to improve on Nature."

Gurney was looking pensive. He was wondering how Mr. Jones would take the news, his news, but the moment seemed propitious.

"I have a favour to ask, sir."

"Yes, Gurney, what is it?"

"I want to join the Forces as a chaplain. I hope you will release me."

Mr. Jones's eyebrows went up, but not unpleasantly so. Well, who would have thought that this little fellow had the—guts? But it was a very commendable proposal.

"You wish to join up, Gurney? Well——"

"And go overseas, sir, to share—as much as I can—what other men have to suffer."

"A very admirable spirit, my dear fellow."

"You may be able to get an older man to take my place. Of course, I will remain with you until you get help, if you wish it."

Mr. Jones caressed his chin. It was incipiently double.

"Thank you, Gurney. I appreciate your—consideration. I will see what I can do about it. Let me say that I think your choice does you credit."

"Thank you, sir."

They smiled at each other. Gurney was thinking that old Jones was not a bad sort, and Mr. Jones was thinking that he really did like this little man. And then Mr. Jones did a pleasant thing. He

produced a pair of scissors, snipped a flower from Victoria, and presented it to Gurney.

"Wear it, my dear fellow. A kind of badge of courage, what. Put it in your buttonhole."

Gurney did so, and vicar and curate shook hands.

When Southfleet heard the news it was both kindly and unkindly amused. Now, of what use would this funny little fellow be to the British Army, even as a wearer of the black cross? Southfleet suffered from the common illusion that courage and the martial virtues go with looks. Now, just consider Captain Hargreaves of the local Territorials, standing six feet two, blond, buxom, overbearingly handsome, and then take a squint at Gurney. Poor little pop-gun, and not even loaded! The ladies said of Captain Hargreaves: "What a splendid soldier he will make," and the dear ladies were completely wrong. Captain Hargreaves proved to be a dreadful failure, and in secret a rather dastardly failure; for, after two months in the trenches, he came home suffering from neuritis, and his men were glad to be rid of him. He had earned the title of The Dug-out King, and his abode had been christened Windy Corner. As for his malady, a cynical medical officer might have described it as "Funkitis". Captain Hargreaves's colonel and the self-same M.O. had held consultation.

"Oh, send the blighter down, Gates. He will only be a danger and a darned nuisance."

Mr. Sawkins guffawed over the news. Little St. John in khaki! What a joke! But it would be one way of getting rid of the fellow. Mr. Sawkins dared to become facetious in the face of Mr. Slade, and these two old hostile dogs growled at each other.

"Now, we shall win the war, Slade."

"Why—we?"

"Well, I shall help to pay for it."

"Then sell your pants," said Mr. Slade, which was vulgar of him.

Mr. Sawkins sizzled. "I can remember the days when——"

"I cleaned your boots. There are certain people in this town who are not fit to clean Gurney's footgear."

"Meaning me?"

"Just as you like."

And Mr. Slade left it at that.

Not until November did his country find a use for Gurney, nor did its casual attitude suggest that a little padre was of any importance. Chaplains were a convention and were "Taken on the Strength" as a sort of sop to the Deity and the Churches, and they could be of far less significance than a regiment's mascot, even though that creature was a goat. Doctors were necessary, veterinary surgeons were necessary, and in a cavalry regiment the vet was of more importance than the M.O. Mr. Gurney was to go to his great adventure like a lamb to the slaughter, but a lamb that carried no pennon.

The Rev. Egbert Jones had managed to obtain the services of a middle-aged curate, one the Rev. Herbert Simkins, baldish and mild and blue-eyed. Mr. Simkins would suit Mr. Jones very well, being a sort of buttered scone, and completely uncontroversial. Emily approved of Mr. Simkins, and so did Miss Godbold. He had a sweet and succulent way with the ladies, a nice tenor voice, and he could play on the piano. Moreover, he was unmarried, possessed no patchouli past, and had a curious and bland facility for suggesting that each and every lady was the one and particular charmer. Miss Godbold could refer to him as "Dear Mr. Simkins". Mr. Simkins's handshake was flabby, but he had such nice, pink, gentlemanly hands.

Gurney spent a week in London buying kit, and waiting to be fitted by his tailor. He stayed at an hotel in Bloomsbury, and during the day he made pilgrimages to those parts of the great city which had both memories and live associations for him. He visited his old school and was surprised to find that it had grown smaller, and that the boundaries he had hit at cricket must have been quite mild swipes. Yes, he still had his cricket, but would cricket be of any use in the Army? He took a bus to the East

End and wandered, and sought out Bert and Alf and Fred, but Bert and Alf had joined up, and Fred was depressed, nursing a septic finger. Gurney found London somehow strange and vaguely unfriendly. It was like a woman who had taken to trousers and who strode right through and across the sacred fields of philosophy. It seemed to be fragmental and fractious in its moods, both animated and dour. Night life appeared to be flourishing. The home front had not learnt to laugh. Maybe it would never do so, but grow tetchy and tired, and lose its manners.

Gurney attended at his tailors'. They were not Savile Row, for economy was necessary, and neither Gurney's tunic nor his breeches were up to the Guards' standard, but a breezy young fitter pretended to be pleased with the result. After all, if criticism had been forthcoming, Gurney's physique might have borne it, not the tailor's craft. He had trouble, too, with his cap. His very large, long head was not accommodating. Also, his little legs and the leggings produced were not sympathetic towards each other. Gurney paid his bills, and gave instructions for all these goods to be delivered to his London hotel. His dress rehearsal should be in private.

It was so, and Gurney stood in front of a wardrobe mirror and surveyed himself. No cause for personal vanity here! Even Gurney's humility had to accept the picture as frankly unimpressive. He did look a funny little figure of a man; his legs were too short, his breeches wrinkled, his cap a mushroom growth. He took in his Sam Browne a hole or two, and saw that he had a waist, the wrong kind of waist, like a girl's. His tummy seemed to stick out. There was no swagger in the mirror's reflection, no smartness, no masculine gallantry. He was just a little curate bundled up in brown.

"Well, well," thought Gurney, "I am what I am. I shall be what I shall be."

Southfleet Station. Gurney had three days left to him before he was to report for duty at a Kentish sea-coast town.

The station was quiescent on this November day, the High Street just the High Street. Gurney felt self-conscious in his uniform; he was wearing his great-coat and he carried a cane, but without swagger. In fact, so shy was Gurney that he was tempted to take a cab, but he dismissed the temptation as cowardly. A red-nosed outside-porter took charge of Gurney's valise and kit-bag, and saluted him with alcoholic servility. He addressed him as "Captain", and Gurney felt that he was being made a fool of by a beery cringer out for tips.

"Vine Cottage."

"Right y'are, Captain."

Gurney rid himself of the fellow. He had no desire to magnify his first public parade by associating it with a leery loafer and a hand-barrow. He should have felt full of swagger and he did not. His tailor had cut the great-coat too long, and it seemed to hang almost about his ankles. Gurney carried his cane like a flower held by the stalk. He did not swing it or beat a leg with it. No strutting hero—this!

Gurney was within ten yards of Mr. Slade's shop when he saw Mr. Sawkins coming towards him. The very gorge of Gurney's shyness seemed to rise at the prospect of a meeting with Mr. Sawkins. He diverged, and almost trotted into Mr. Slade's shop, and found himself being smiled upon by two young assistants. To the women at that time anything in khaki was exciting.

"Mr. Slade in?"

"Yes, sir, in the office."

Then, one of them grasped the transfiguration, and gave a little giggle.

"Why, it's Mr. Gurney!"

Gurney crossed rapidly to the office door with its panels of frosted glass. There had been something frosty in that giggle. Would he always be a figure of fun to this so English Southfleet? Did no one divine that other aspiring, bright-eyed, valorous child inside him? To be unusual is to be suspect, and ridicule may be more potent than the policeman. Sex and a man's stomach

are the prime movers of the many, but Gurney belonged to the brotherhood of bastards and hunchbacks in whom the bend-sinister and women's disfavour may light a bitter or a beatific flame.

Gurney opened Mr. Slade's door, still hearing that suggestive giggle. Gurney was no peacock, and he had not much of a tail to spread, but the various irreverences that he had suffered were beginning to sting him into a quiet anger. There would be no outward flare, but the inward blaze might prove unextinguishable.

Mr. Slade was at his desk, entering figures in a ledger. He looked up, cocked his head, and showed all those shrewd, kind wrinkles round his eyes.

"Hallo, John!"

"Hallo, sir."

Gurney closed the door, and Mr. Slade got out of his chair, and his eyes did not look at Gurney's uniform, but into Gurney's eyes.

"Well, John, launched on the great adventure?"

Gurney smiled. He took off his cap and surveyed it. "No feathers in it, I fear."

Mr. Slade's eyes shone keenly. They were not the eyes of an old man.

"But there will be, John, there will be."

How would She see him? As those giggling girls had seen him? He had been asked to sup at Sea View, and it was a strangely scared little man who rang the bell and waited in the darkness. It was Eliza who opened the door to him, an Eliza who had prepared a super-supper and was determined to welcome the hero. Eliza was a Gurneyite of formidable fierceness.

"Good evening, sir."

"Why, it's you, Eliza!"

"Yes, it's me."

And Eliza looked him over with favour. "My, it's good to see you, sir, in uniform."

She took his cap and helped him off with his great-coat, and hung it up.

"I'm glad you've got a good warm coat like that, sir."

"So am I, Eliza."

Her motherliness warmed him.

She opened a door and stood aside. "Captain Gurney, ma'am."

She was alone and sitting by the fire. And where was her father? Why had Mr. Slade been suddenly inspired to go in search of champagne? She did not rise but turned to look at him, and her upward glance was on his face. The khaki-clad body was a shell, the essential spirit of him in his eyes. And for that upward, intimate glance he blessed her.

"Come and get warm, John."

She was in a low chair, with a tuffet beside her. She put out a hand and like some simple soldier of the Cross Gurney bent down and kissed her fingers.

"Forgive me, but——"

He became confused, and sat down hurriedly, with the firelight playing upon his face. It has been said by a wise mother that woman is always nearer to reality than man. Man, the supposedly practical, is the dreamer of dreams, while woman suffers him to dress her in his dreamstuff, and wears it like fancy-dress at a children's party. The lot that Nature has laid upon woman is marked by a rhythm of malaise and pain. She bears children, she nurtures them, she loses them. She suffers the child in man, and if she loves him will plan to protect that child, even when it is fractious and foolish, and perhaps—unfaithful. Her prestige, whatever the new freedom may have to say about it, is in its full flower when her marriage can be proud and happy.

So, Rose Hallard sat beside John Gurney in the firelight, and knew him as a dreamer, but as a dreamer whose vision of a notable life was not mere illusion. Such humility as he possessed, mounted upon courage, might find the carnal crowd strangely at his feet. This little man would never be fractious or unfaithful, yet his simplicity was no mere gilded image, but subtle, complex and sensitive, as alive and various as the earth in the

spring. And to such a woman as Rose Hallard there was but one thing that he lacked. Dominance, not the dominance of mere strutting egoism, but that personal panoply that can shine, though it may be no more than a white sheet. She knew now that she could love him even though he was laughed at, but she wished to love him as a man who could laugh.

"How does it feel, John, to be in uniform?"

He stared at the fire. "A little—ridiculous."

"Oh, no, my dear, not that. Call it—masquerading, and then——"

She paused, and he turned questioning eyes to her.

"And then—reality. I suppose a uniform becomes as familiar as a skin, so much so that you forget it."

He smiled. "In forgetting one's self."

"Perhaps?"

"How very wise you are."

"I wise?" and she laughed. "I have always understood that men hate wise women."

His impulse was to tell her his secret, and while he hesitated, Mr. Slade came into the room, holding a bottle of champagne by the neck. Gurney drew a deep breath. What relief! So near had he been to blurting out words that might have put a barrier between them. If she were to suspect? Dear innocent, as if she did not know.

"Hallo, John! Don't be shocked. Even crusaders are allowed to celebrate."

Gurney stood up, and looked at the bottle. "I should like to feel that I am a crusader."

Her voice answered him. "You are, John."

He gave a quick movement of the head. He looked down at her.

"Am I?"

She nodded, and Mr. Slade, who was observing them, laughed in his secret soul. When would John Gurney discover the truth and his voice? Would champagne stimulate the lover in him?

As a matter of fact—it did not.

XXII

GURNEY'S first weeks at Chalkestone were not particularly happy ones. He was billeted with two old ladies on the sea front, together with three medical officers, an elderly Scotch quartermaster, and an A.S.C. major. All these other men had definite jobs to do, but Gurney's day was vague and desultory. These other men were pragmatists, and close to reality, while John Gurney's duties were ethical and unpractical. His military duties were limited to a weekly service and sermon, for his senior officer, a clerical major, was a man of jocund energy and breeziness, who took to himself a large portion of the ecclesiastical feast. Gurney was permitted to manage a reading and amusement room and library, and to show himself at the Services Club, but these duties depressed him. He felt like a hanger-on to the tail-board of the great machine, and he was rewarded with little but the dust.

He hated having to preach to these men. They sat and listened as on duty, and shuffled their feet, and were like a crowd of vigorous young animals shut up in a market square. They would so much have preferred to rush out and kick a football. They gazed at him stolidly, and it was obvious to him that they were bored. So was he. He was becoming prejudiced against oratory, his own and anybody else's. He could not pour out the hearty and patriotic guff that his senior emitted with the naturalness of a man belching. In fact, he felt a humbug, a hired superfluity. Almost he could hear men saying: "What darned use in a war is a bloody parson?" He was fed and paid as a sort of stage supernumerary. Deep down in him was a profound discontent. He felt that he was of no significance to these men; he did not drill, doctor, or feed them. And his passionate urge was to lay his hands upon them, get a grip upon their manhood, prove that by sharing their perils and hardships he was somehow brother and man.

Words, words, words! And a voice in him was clamouring for "Deeds, deeds, deeds." Doing came before talking. How humiliating this sermonizing could be. A rebellious voice would pester him while he was trying to preach. It shouted: "Humbug, humbug! What you should be doing is looking fear in the face. You are just a little schoolmaster fellow. Those who can't do, teach."

Nor did John Gurney feel happy in his billet. He had the worst bedroom in the house, but that was of no consequence. He met these other men at meals, back from their various activities, while he had just been pottering about like a French clown at a circus. They had things to talk about; he had nothing. Moreover, he realized that his presence placed a certain constraint upon this very male community. Someone might begin a story, remember the presence of the Church, and cut the story short, or—with a grin—apologize for it.

"Sorry, padre."

So, they regarded him as not quite man! In fact, though they liked him in a casual and tolerant fashion, they were kind to him as they might have been kind to a creature that was not quite normal. They even teased him.

"What's the day's good deed, padre?"

Yes, he was just a kind of boy-scout.

Now, of all the many men who were preparing for the great adventure there were, probably, but very few whose whole urge was to be translated to the bloody business out yonder. Gurney was one of the few. In fact, he became so importunate, and was always badgering his senior for a transfer to active operations that the Rev. Major Moncrief became bored with him. Why couldn't the wretched little fellow stay put?

"Oh, very well, Gurney, very well. We will see what we can do."

Gurney received letters from George, from Mr. Slade and from Her. Yet, how far away that other world seemed with its Sawkinses, Miss Godbolds and Emilies; and maybe Gurney was

not sorry to be remote from that part of it. How narrow it was, how prejudiced and ungenerous, the heritage of Victorian fathers whose morality had spilled unwanted daughters upon the world and left them to the care of posterity. On the other hand there were the Richmonds, Mr. Golightly, Polly Cotgrove and old Rawlins. And those letters from Her! They surprised him, filled him with a secret and wondering exultation. She wrote easily yet intimately to him as to man, and in a little while he escaped from self-consciousness on paper, and wrote to her as man. He even told her of the ineptitude of things that troubled him, the futility of merely talking, his impatience, his sense of shame.

She answered him as one who understood, and to whom his confessions were precious. Her letters became to him a source of secret strength. He carried them about with him. They were his passport to the world he asked for. He could smile over his associates' broad or bawdy stories. What did they matter when he had that other symbol? A kind of amused and gentle tolerance came to him.

"Sorry, padre."

"Go ahead. You must have your fun."

He wrote his letters to Her in his little shabby bedroom with an attaché case on his knees. "My Dear Mrs. Hallard" became "Dear Mrs. Hallard," then "Dear Rose". He lingered over the writing of those two words. Rose of Heaven, Damask Rose, the Romaunt of the Rose, but not yet—if ever—Roses in Picardy. There was perfume in the inscription. He liked to think of her reading his letters before the fire, or in the deep and secret shade of the veranda, with the sea and sky before her, and his confession in her heart.

"*Dear John.*"

Was he really her dear John?

Then came the day, a bleak bright spring day when Gurney had notice for overseas. The badgered Major had badgered others. "Rid me of this restless little fire-eater."

"Want embarkation leave, Gurney?"

"Can I have two days, sir?"

"Of course."

"Will it be France, sir?"

"Yes, France."

Gurney was happy or unhappy in having no relations whom he wished to see. His father and mother were dead, and his various aunts, uncles and cousins were not of his world. John Gurney had been the family "sport", and he had been despised by two or three broods of peculiarly blatant and bumptious cousins who dwelt at Bromley and Ilford, and were all busy in the city. They were young men who might talk a great deal about the war, and keep out of it as long as possible. As for the female members, they had been particularly offensive to Gurney, large, strenuous, sallow young women with kinky black hair; all arrogantly capable. Gurney packed a haversack and set out for Southfleet. If Mrs. Cotgrove could not put him up for two nights, he could go to the Regency Hotel.

But that was not to be. Gurney, marching down the High Street, and feeling somehow that his manhood was to be justified, ran straight into Mr. Slade who had popped out to inspect a newly-dressed window. The extraordinary thing about Mr. Slade was that he had managed to transcend all local snobbery. He kept a shop, but in Southfleet he was a social somebody.

"Hallo, John!"

"Two days' leave, sir. I'm for France."

"Rather sudden, my lad."

"Not too sudden for me. I am going to see if Mrs. Cotgrove can take me in."

"Oh no, you're not, John," said Mr. Slade, with a hand on Gurney's shoulder. "You are coming to us."

"But, sir——"

"No buts about it. George is at school. I'll walk round with you now."

"Hadn't we better give Mrs. Hallard some warning?"

Mr. Slade looked at him with affectionate slyness.

"All right, use our telephone."

"Not I. But you, sir."

"All right, I'll do the dreadful deed."

Mr. Slade had a telephone in his office and Gurney, cap in hand, stood and listened. Mr. Slade appeared to be enjoying the conversation. "John is here. Two days' embarkation leave. I want to put him up. Can you? What? Oh, yes, don't bother, I'll run round to the shops. Well, I'll send him along. Thank you, my dear."

Mr. Slade hung up the receiver and smiled at Gurney.

"You are to report at once, Captain Gurney. Superior's orders. About turn, quick march."

Gurney took the cliff road. A north-east wind was blowing, but what did John Gurney care for the wind. That wayward nymph—the English spring—might be shivering in Victorian muslin, but the sun was shining, and the sea was a'glitter, and he was to spend two days with Her. What a prelude to the great adventure! Gurney came to the gate of Sea View, and hesitated there like a child pausing before opening some precious parcel. Was he afraid? He was, deliciously afraid, shaken by exquisite anguish. To think that he——! He saw a curtain move, a hand wave. He walked up the path to the white trellised porch, and as he reached it the door opened. It was she who opened it.

Gurney stood mute. Then he raised a hand to the peak of his cap.

"I'm afraid I'm putting you to a lot of trouble."

She looked at him steadfastly, but there was soft laughter at the back of her eyes.

"You are, John."

"I can easily go to——"

"My dear, don't be silly."

Her face seemed to float forward to him. What was the surprising and exquisite inspiration that caused him to——? Good God, he had kissed her! Had she invited the——? Oh, no, of course not! How could he think such a thought? He stood there rather like a flabbergasted boy.

"I hope—you—didn't mind, Rose?"

"Come in, my dear."

"Somehow, I—couldn't help it."

"Nor could I, John."

"Really?" and he just stared at her.

Perhaps no man in the British Army ever enjoyed his last days in England as John Gurney enjoyed them. He had no responsibilities to leave behind, no emotional outbursts to dread, no fears to assuage. He was Ye Perfect Gentle Knight walking with his lady, who was not yet his, and whom he had not the conceit or the audacity to claim! He just looked and loved and was happy, happy as he who is above the mere greeds of the flesh, and can leave his rose untouched upon the tree. He was content to be near her, to look into her eyes, to talk or to be silent. Strange, little fellow! Able to feel the mystery of feeling as he did, to savour the perfume of it, and not to rush into some passionate finale, and demand the last favour, before going out to meet with death.

Mr. Slade watched them and was wise in cultivating a benign aloofness. Let these two dear creatures find each other in their own way, and walk and talk as they pleased. Mr. Slade was always disappearing into the garden, or finding letters to write, or memories to revive. Almost, he used a watering-can upon these memories. And what would Southfleet think if——? Did it matter? Damn that part of Southfleet which loved to put skinny fingers into the honey-pot and such bony knuckles! Did they choose to be seen in public together? They did. They walked on the pier, and old Rawlins, having saluted them, smacked his thigh.

"Lord love a duck, what'll all the old women say about that? Well, what I says is: 'Damned good luck to 'em both.'"

Southfleet did comment upon this particular parade. Gurney was on embarkation leave and was spending it at Sea View. He had been seen walking on the pier with Mrs. Hallard. He had even been seen leaning with her over the railings and——

"No, my dear, I really can't believe—that!"

"But I assure you——"

"Holding her hand?"

"Yes."

"But I can't believe the local beauty could see anything in a funny little——"

"Local beauty, my dear! Tee-hee! She must be over thirty. The merry widow, what!"

Apparently, certain of the local ladies could not imagine any woman being merry with Gurney. They suffered from the Captain Hargreaves complex, the fellow who could pull fierce moustachios, and slap a leg, and become much less fierce in the face of the enemy.

Gurney had to report back to Chalkestone, whence he would be labelled to his destination, and his return journey could carry him through London. He wanted to take George out to lunch. Why should they not both see George? So, a telegram was sent to the master's house in Canonbury where George was a boarder, notifying the Rev. William Wardle that Mrs. Hallard would collect her son at the school punctually at noon.

They stood at the gate together, beside the porters' red brick lodge, and looked across the asphalt and the grass to the great mock-Gothic building with its two fat granite legs where the steps went up. Or were they two grey tusks in the building's maw? Yonder was the gymnasium. The great yellow brick walls of warehouses and factories shut in half the playground like gaunt cliffs. The planes and poplars were faintly tinged with green. A clock struck twelve, and down those granite steps a little black figure in its Sunday suit came running.

Said his mother: "What a strange thing, that it should be necessary to insist upon a Sunday suit."

Gurney was watching the boy. "Discipline, I suppose. I don't expect it will spoil George's appetite. Besides, you know, I ought to approve of Sunday suits."

"And do you?"

"Not—always."

Was George surprised to see Gurney with his mother? Maybe he was, but Gurney's presence seemed to stimulate the boy's pleasure. George was not a jealous child, and his hero was in khaki.

"Oh, I say, Mr. Gurney!"

His mother kissed him, and there were no other boys there to mock.

"Mr. Gurney's come to say good-bye. He is going to France."

And what did George think of that? Not much, or a great deal? George's world would be the same world, guns and khaki-clad soldiers, and no longer of German manufacture, boredom on the school bench, thrills at cricket. Maybe, both his elders were inwardly wondering how the boy might feel about—— Oh, that was hypothetical, and not yet to be confronted by either of them. The day was the day, a boy's healthy tummy the justification.

They took a taxi in Aldersgate Street, and drove to a small city restaurant with which Gurney was familiar. George sat between them, separating them, yet somehow linking them together. George's animation had died down; he was unaccountably serious and silent. This mood and his Sunday suit seemed to be in sympathy.

Said his mother: "You want a new hat, dear. It's rather shabby."

George did not appear to be interested in hats. He sat and stared out of the windows, mute and self-contained. His mother's eyes and Gurney's met over his head.

"What would you like for lunch, George?"

George seemed to reflect. "Oh, I don't mind."

Now, what was the meaning of that? The emotional processes of the young might be mysterious and disturbing. This other entity had to be considered. Neither his mother nor Gurney were Freudians, but a child is a child.

"Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, George, or sausages and mashed potatoes?"

Gurney had a sudden feeling that the suggestion was dreadfully crude. Somehow, the boy had not a mashed-potato face.

"I don't mind."

They were driving down Cheapside, and Gurney was conscious of embarrassment in the presence of this silent boy. Had George divined? Was he imposing upon this child unhappy forebodings?

Then George spoke. "Will you have to go into the trenches, Mr. Gurney?"

"I hope so."

The boy looked up at him anxiously. "You will take care of yourself, won't you?"

Gurney smiled a funny, wincing smile, and put his arm suddenly about the boy. "I will, George, I will."

XXIII

JOHN GURNEY arrived at Havre in the gloom of a grey morning. Everything looked grey, the sea, other ships, the town whose greyness was the dirtiest of all. Gurney had spent the night on deck, eschewing a cabin with wire bunks where an assortment of other officer reinforcements had spread itself. One of them had snored prodigiously, and Gurney had missed that music.

But, perhaps, he had some glimpses of the future. He would have to live with men who snored, and smoked foul pipes, and perhaps told fouler stories, and whose conversation could be bald and boring Not an easy life for a sensitive soul. Gurney had felt acutely alone during that channel passage, with no stars and no lights showing, and with his secret self beholding reality in the dark glass of the future. There had been pangs at parting,

and it had been so public a parting, on the pavement outside the restaurant, with the boy looking up wide-eyed at both of them. He had not been able to say that which might have been said. If he could have kissed her. Why hadn't he kissed her? And yet her hand had held almost fervently to his.

"Bacon and eggs, you fellows!"

Someone had discovered a café canteen for officers, and Gurney's inner man responded to the cry. He sat in silence with other men, human pottery on the wheel of fate, and ate his breakfast, and no one noticed him. A brittle cheerfulness prevailed, but it was thin ice. All these men were on the edge of the unknown and the unknowable. Gurney, watching those feeding faces, thought how strange it was that some of them would die.

There was a doctor among them; the doctor did not go unnoticed, and Gurney realized that a doctor might matter. Oh, terribly so! If you were disembowelled or dismembered, or in agonizing pain, it would matter to you that there was a man at hand who was capable and of a good courage. Were all doctors like that? Gurney wondered. His belief in the equality of souls might receive shrewd shocks. He would hear men say: "That windy rotter." Yes, other men, maimed and moaning or deadly still, would ask for a man with capable hands. A doctor mattered. But a parson? He handled neither bomb, rifle, nor bandage. He was just a voice; perhaps a presence, and it might be an unwelcome presence. His duty was to strengthen and console men's souls. He was a soul-doctor. But did these men ask for religion, or rather—the conventions of the parish pulpit? In their dark hours would they turn to the priest, and cry; "Father: God help me?" Did they believe in a God? Gurney slowly drank his second cup of coffee, unnoticed, and unincluded in the brotherhood. Already, he was feeling an alien, an uncomfortable creature who might be tolerated if he did not raise virtue too loftily upon a flagpole, or look sour and glum when the primitive in man broke loose. No, his was not going to be an easy task. Other men might suspect the prig, and he had to prove himself man

Gurney spent a week in a camp for reinforcements on a bleak hill outside Havre. No one seemed to know anything about him, or to need him. He mealed at a communal mess run by a somewhat sinister young French woman, in a hideous villa, and slept in another villa inhabited by a melancholy and black-bearded Frenchman and his wife. The Lady of the Mess was known as Madelin. She was murky and thin and hard-lipped. She was young, but looked as though she had never been young. Her parchment face threw off badinage and amorous squibs as a tambourine might repel peas.

"Don't you fall for Madelin, padre."

"You could have her for five francs."

"But she'd give you clap."

Gurney sought to drill himself into accepting this irresponsible playfulness. The austerity must be removed from his smile. A benign tolerance, a human feeling for the frailties of the flesh! And was it frailty, or just nature? But he longed to escape from this half-way house. It seemed so strange that he, who was so eager to plunge into the real business, should find it so difficult to get there. Was it that parsons were not wanted, that they were mere accessories, after-thoughts.

The order came at last from the camp commandant. He was to report to a Divisional Headquarters at Bethune. He packed his kit, and attempted to pay for his billet, but the melancholy Frenchman would not accept a single franc.

"We do not take money from those who come to help us, monsieur."

That touched John Gurney, and made up for Madelin and the Mess. He and the Frenchman shook hands.

"*Bonne chance*, monsieur. You see, I can be no use. I am a consumptive."

Gurney's French was not well oiled, but he gathered the man's meaning, and was moved by his sad and sallow face. Almost, that luxuriant beard seemed to grow on a mask of wax.

"That is——" but Gurney could not find the word, so he shook hands a second time, and departed.

Bethune was a somewhat sinister town, gloomed over by its grim black church tower with eyes like owls', save that they were empty eyes. Here and there the teeth in its narrow streets were broken where shells had brought down the houses. It possessed shops and a civilian population, all shabby and vaguely sinister like Bethune itself. South of Bethune lay a colliery district, and the coal dust might have spread over the place! It had the grimy face of a collier, and even when the sun shone its grey pile continued to be grey.

Gurney left his kit with the R.T.O. and went to report to Divisional Headquarters. He found it in a château-villa off the main place, and under the shadow of the owl-eyed tower. He was dealt with by a sergeant-clerk who advised him to report to Major Morgan, the senior chaplain, at D. Mess. D. Mess had its home in another villa, in a little square where lime-trees were coming sadly into leaf about a patch of starved grass.

All the members of the mess were out upon their various duties, and the mess-orderly advised Gurney to wait until Major Morgan returned, so Gurney sat in the chilly, tile-floored room, with nothing to keep him company but a few old periodicals and magazines. A most depressing room, this, ugly and unwelcoming, and John Gurney went out and strolled about Bethune, and forgot to salute sundry senior officers, who, seeing his badge, passed him by as a green little padre. Gurney was hungry, and wondering where and when he would get his next meal.

Returning, tired and depressed, to D. Mess, he found a long, lean man with a face like a grey old fox's, sprawling in a chair, and reading a magazine. The reader turned his head and looked up with cold and unfriendly eyes at Gurney. He wore the insignia of a full colonel, and the badge of the R.A.M.C. Gurney was sufficiently experienced to salute him.

"Who are you?" said a thin, harsh voice that was addicted to sarcasm.

"My name is Gurney, sir. I was advised to report here."

"By whom?"

"A sergeant at headquarters, sir."

"A sergeant? No business of his to send you here. This is —my—mess."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was told I should find the senior chaplain here."

"He may be in for tea."

The doctor colonel gave him another of those cold looks.

"My mess is full. Major Morgan will have to settle you somewhere."

The colonel returned to his reading, and left Gurney standing, and feeling completely superfluous. An ornamental French clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and but for that sound there was silence. Gurney stood gazing at the back of the long, lean doctor's head. It had a little baldish spot in the midst of its greyness that was like a pale and hostile eye. Gurney turned and crept out, but his boots made a creaking sound on the tiled floor. He was not going to stay in a room where that frosty and unfriendly presence froze his sensitive pride. The colonel glanced irritably over his shoulder, but did not attempt to prevent Gurney's exit.

"Where do I go now?" thought he.

The mess-orderly passed him with a tray of cups and plates. Tea? How pleasant would have been a hot cup of tea. It was quite ridiculous, but Gurney felt very near to tears. And then, as he was about to put his hand to the vestibule door, that door opened with a jocund heartiness, and just missed Gurney's face.

"Hullo! Sorry," said a voice.

Gurney found himself gazing into the broad and vital face of Major Morgan. It was a Welsh face and a Welsh head, both sombre and luminous. It had dark eyes that could be both fierce and infinitely kind.

"Hullo, are you Gurney?"

"Yes, sir."

Major Morgan put out a hand, and its grip was comforting "Just heard about you from headquarters. Come in. Where's your kit?"

"At the station, sir."

"I'll have it sent for."

Gurney stood hesitant. "Forgive me, sir, but I'm afraid I'm not very welcome here."

"What?"

"The colonel in there said his mess was full."

Major Morgan looked capable of blurting out a very vulgar and expressive word that was not for the lips of clerics. So, Colonel Sykes had snarled at this tired and depressed little man. Colonel Sykes's day was largely spent in snarling at people, and in catching them bending, for this was one of the war's great games. Major Morgan's Welsh blood was up. Colonel Sykes might be his senior but the red dragon could counter the grey wolf.

"Just wait a moment, Gurney."

He disappeared into the mess-room, and the orderly emerged from it with discreet haste, closing the door after him. Gurney stood and listened to two voices. They began quite politely, if with frigidity, but in a minute or so they were battling in the air like angry birds. Gurney could not help hearing portions of the argument.

"Shut up, Morgan. You have no idea of discipline. This is my mess, and I——"

"The mess is not run for your special pleasure, sir. What, in the name of God, are we supposed to be doing out here? You may be my senior, but——"

"I should advise you to remember it, Morgan. One padre is enough in my mess. After all, what use are you fellows? Personally, I can't see——"

"No, you wouldn't, sir. I quite agree. You have no understanding of men, or of what——"

"Look here, Morgan, if I have any more impertinence——"

"You can have as much as you please, or as you deserve, sir. I will just ask you one question. Am I to go and see the General on this matter?"

"You can go to blazes as far as I am concerned."

"Very well, sir. When a man is hungry and tired, and has

come out here among strangers, only to do his duty, you would turn him away?"

"Oh, well, damn it, bring the fellow in and feed him. He can go to one of the Ambulances to-morrow."

"I think I had better see the General."

"Oh, all right, all right. I don't want to be hard on one of your pups. Let him sleep here to-night."

"Thank you, sir. I will send for his kit."

Major Morgan came out, very white but smiling, and his black hair vulgarly victorious. He knew Mr. Sykes, and that this senior snarler was not popular with the other members of the Staff. The grey fox could fawn, and the Division's General, who was a gentleman, did not like that sort of beast. Colonel Sykes had a vulpine smell, and no great reputation for courage in unpleasant places.

"It's all right, Gurney. I'll send for your kit. Got a valise?"

"Yes, sir."

"I think we can drop the 'sir' between padres. You can shake down in my room to-night."

Gurney's face lost its tiredness, and became luminous.

"Thank you, thank you very much."

And so began a friendship that was to grow and deepen between two men who were too passionately absorbed in their work to be jealous of each other.

Major Morgan sat on the edge of his bed, John Gurney on his unrolled valise. Both were in their pyjamas, and Major Morgan was smoking a pipe. A most unecclesiastical figure was this Welshman's. Gurney was asking questions, and Major Morgan was answering them and reflecting upon these same questions. Their implication was somewhat unusual. He knew, and knew with some fierce impatience, that irreverent things were said about the "Cloth", and that some of the representatives whom the war had sent him did not sustain his own strenuous standard. Surely, the one man who should not fear death or shirk it was the priest who preached immortality, and yet in Major Morgan's

experience too many chaplains had too sacred a respect for their own skins. They were content to potter about in the back areas, talk, and eschew the terrible test of flaming fear. For Major Morgan knew what fear was, and how it could transform a man into a mean and quaking mass of selfishness. It was a natural reaction, a savage urge towards self-preservation, but man's ordeal lay in the transcending of it. Did other men respect a priest who preached to them when they were in billets, and was never seen in the trenches? They did not. Why should they?

"Can I go everywhere?"

"What do you mean by everywhere, Gurney?"

"Where the men have to go. The trenches and the gunpits, and the aid-posts."

Major Morgan, elbows on knees, one hand embracing the bowl of his pipe, and two large white feet protruding from striped pyjama trousers, looked with interest at this neophyte.

"Yes, if you wish to."

"Do I need a pass or anything?"

"No, the job is the pass. Should any C.O. call you up, refer him to me. But the right sort of C.O. won't."

"So, I just go where the urge wills."

"Just so, Gurney. The urge. You want to be with the men?"

"Yes."

"Good. You won't like some of the things you may run into."

"I suppose not, but that's my—calling."

"Care about preaching?"

"Not much."

"Good. Being in the dirt and the danger with the men is the best sort of sermon. And they understand it."

Major Morgan was thinking: "I'll try and get him placed with Bruce's ambulance. They are a good crowd. They had rather a sickener with Bluett. This little fellow ought to be a useful contrast." He bit hard on his pipe and stared at his own feet.

"I'll try and put you with one of our Field Ambulances, Gurney, the best of them. They are covering the forward area

at present. The colonel is named Bruce, a dry Scot, but a good one. No palaver. Can't stand shirkers."

"Thank you."

"They had rather a windy specimen previously, so, it will be your chance to reverse the verdict."

"I'll try to."

"I guess you will."

"Are there any other—duties?"

Major Morgan twiddled his toes. "Yes, burying the poor dead."

Gurney nodded and was silent.

When that most characteristic figure walked into the ambulance mess at Abele Farm he found Colonel Bruce alone and writing a letter to his wife. Major Morgan was a singular member of the Church Militant. He carried a staff that was nearly as long as himself, a kind of pastoral symbol, but useful in bogged and muddy trenches. Men would see him striding, staff in hand, puttees and mackintosh caked with slime, a smile in his eyes, head up, a man fit for men. Colonel Bruce raised a grizzled head, brushed his ginger moustache, and fixed the chaplain with a pair of very blue and ironic eyes.

"Hullo, Morgan. Business or pleasure?"

"Both, sir."

"Sit down. No use offering you a drink?"

"None at all, sir. I'll smoke."

Colonel Bruce grinned, and sat waiting. He was known among the irreverent as "Old Ginger Grin", but it was a term of respect and affection.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Why should I want anything?"

"You generally do."

They grinned at each other.

"I have a new padre, sir."

The man at the table had a very expressive nose, broadening at the tip, yet suggesting a rubber mobility. It appeared to grow

broader between those very blue eyes and the grizzled and reddish moustache.

"Thanks, Morgan, but——"

"Yes, I know, sir; Bluett was a poor specimen."

"More than that, padre. He did you people a lot of harm."

"I know that too, sir, but thanks for your candour. This new man is of very different stuff, or I'm no judge."

Colonel Bruce rubbed his chin. "We are a rather—happy crowd, Morgan."

"I know that too, sir. I have a reason for asking you to take Gurney."

"And the reason?"

"He wants to be in the thick of things, asked me whether he could go everywhere, especially the trenches."

The colonel's very blue eyes narrowed. "That sort of fellow? Not just—hot air and ignorance?"

"I should say most certainly not. The quiet, silent sort. No prig, sir. I told him he wouldn't like some of the things up there. He won't. None of us do, but unless I'm a poor prophet he won't be kept from it."

"Rather a contrast to Bluett."

Major Morgan looked fierce. "I wish you wouldn't keep rubbing in Bluett."

"Sorry, padre. Well, I'll give your little fire-eater a trial trip."

"I'm extremely grateful to you."

The colonel grinned. He knew that his surrender would not be popular with his officers, but Major Morgan was not an easy man to refuse, and the Scot and the Welshman liked each other. Morgan had come to ask a personal favour, but Colonel Bruce knew that behind Major Morgan loomed Divisional Headquarters and the figure of its Commander, who, as it happened, was a man of religion. Major General Carfax had a high colour and an equally high conception of duty, that virtue over which the little highbrows lift contemptuous legs. The Rev. Basil Bluett had been something of a highbrow, and when he had

betrayed deplorable cowardice, and had been interviewed in person by old Carfax, he had, with soapy unction, entered into a psychological explanation of the lapse.

"You don't quite understand, sir. I'm a sensitive fellow. My reactions are not those——"

But the General had caught him up. "Of a soldier and a gentleman, Bluett. You had better go home to the old ladies. You are no use to us."

Major Morgan went upon his way, round the great muck-pond in the courtyard, and out by the farm gate-house and across the moat. He was smiling. How pleasant were these great silver-throated poplars! He missed an in-coming Ford ambulance by two minutes. It contained a sick Tommy, and a most unsick R.A.M.C. captain, one Captain Geoffrey Griggs. Captain Griggs was sandy like his colonel, but with a large, moon-like, freckled face and mischievous blue eyes. He looked very stout and solid, but the thickness of him was not fat but muscle.

Captain Griggs entered the mess by the window. It was fitted with two pairs of low, wooden steps. The colonel had resumed the writing of his letter. He looked up and smiled his old-dog smile. Captain Griggs was his particular pet, a man whom you could put in a hot spot and who would not turn to grease.

"Everything all right?"

"Quite, sir. That shell shook up Cherry Château a bit. No one hurt."

"I've got a piece of news for you."

"What's that, sir?"

"We are to have another padre."

Captain Griggs said: "Damn."

XXIV

A limber, going into Bethune for stores, picked up Gurney's kit, but he himself chose to foot it to Abele Farm. The way was easy. You took the Locon road, crossed the canal by a brick bridge, and then saw across the fields that stately plume of trees. So Gurney saw it on that spring morning, with the sun shining and the sky blue. The great white poplars, marching two abreast, opened out to stand about the homestead with its white walls and red roofs. Abele Farm was one of those lucky places which shells had spared. The farmer was with the French army, but his wife carried on the work with the help of one old man, two boys, and three girls.

Gurney's eyes had a smile in them. How green were the meadows and the fields of young wheat! The war-beast had not trampled them. Larks were singing up above. What strange place was this, while over yonder, not so very far away, bloody things had been happening and were about to happen. Gurney passed a little pond that was white with water-crowfoot. He paused to gaze at it. Peace wore a white garland, and he was to find a home. He had felt so very homeless during the last few days, a man for whom no letters would arrive.

He went on, turned into the poplar avenue, and saw the queer old gatehouse framed by the trees. It was topped by a lead cupola containing a bell. Abele Farm sat on a little island in the midst of a moat, and the water was like black glass. Clumps of marsh-marigold were in flower. Eastwards, and crowding against the wall of a granary, an apple-orchard was in full blossom.

Gurney paused at the gate. He made the sign of the cross. His lips moved.

"Peace be upon this place."

He entered. He saw men in khaki, a motor-ambulance with a red cross upon its side, a woman sewing at a window. An officer stepped out of one doorway, and into another doorway.

The grey stones of the courtyard surrounded the huge manure-pit that was shaped like an open-air bathing-pool, and it was here that Gurney became conscious of the smell. It assailed all newcomers, but familiarity bred—not contempt but a certain insensitiveness to this perpetual odour.

Gurney looked about him, and felt lost. A very old man was carrying fodder into a cowhouse. An R.A.M.C. corporal came out of a doorway, and to him Gurney addressed himself.

"Excuse me, can you direct me to the Officers' Mess?"

The corporal gave Gurney an appraising stare, and saluted.

"Up those wooden steps, sir, over there, and in at the window."

It seemed a strange method of approach. He thanked the corporal, rounded the manure pit, and came to the steps. He mounted them, and stood framed in the window.

The Officers' Mess was at lunch. Gurney saw the sunny room, the whitewashed walls, the long table, the tiled floor, and those six men in khaki. His body had shut off some of the light, and simultaneously—or so it seemed to him—six faces turned to look at him. And they seemed strangely silent faces, critical, mute, unwelcoming.

Gurney moistened his lips. "Excuse me, I'm the new padre."

The faces remained smileless and unfriendly. Then the oldest face spoke.

"Mr. Gurney?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come in. Had lunch?"

"No, sir."

"Come in and have some."

Gurney stepped in, feeling rather like a man who was to take a plunge into cold water. He got rid of his haversack and coat. The mess had gone on with its feeding. Gurney looked for a chair, and there was no chair. He stood hesitant.

"Smith," sang a voice.

The mess-orderly put his head in. "Yessir."

"Another chair."

"Yessir."

Gurney sat. A plate with bully beef and vegetables was placed before him, also—cutlery and a glass. It so happened that Gurney had been placed at the foot of the table opposite Colonel Bruce, and before beginning his meal, he crossed himself, and with bent head said a silent grace. This little piece of ritual did not pass unnoticed. Someone winked at someone else, and someone pulled a face.

The figure at the head of the table wiped its moustache. "I had better introduce you, Mr. Gurney."

"Thank you, sir."

"Captain Griggs, Captain Ryder, Captain Smart, Lieutenant Hornblower, Lieutenant Toms."

The men appeared to find the ceremony provocative. Each officer when named gave Gurney a nod or a bow. Gurney bent his head in turn to all of them. There was playful prejudice in the ritual, ironical appraisement. The new padre looked a funny little bit of goods, and yet—this interpolated enigma had dignity. He met all their glances without flinching. He lacked the soapy smugness of a Bluett, nor was his voice that of an ecclesiastical eunuch.

It was Griggs who made the suggestion. "Have some beer, padre?"

Gurney smiled.

"Yes, thank you, I'd like some beer."

Gurney had to catch up with the others, and he concentrated upon bully beef and vegetables, but if the mess was taking stock of him, he too was not blind. So these were the men with whom he would have to live. Captain Ryder was dark and serious with a moustache draping prominent teeth, a horse-faced man with strained eyes. Captain Smart was rather like his name, debonair and dudish and very smart about the legs. Lieut. Hornblower was very tall and thin and with grey eyes that could be cold and disconcerting. Toms, the Quartermaster, looked just a high-coloured, cheeky boy. Gurney examined them all with shy carefulness, but to him Captain Griggs was the pick of the bunch. There was a friendly challenge in that broad, freckled, good-humoured face.

Gurney's kit had arrived before him. It lay in the Orderly Room, and Colonel Bruce remembered its existence, and Gurney's need of a bed and a batman.

"I'm afraid we shall have to put you in a tent, Gurney, for the time being. In the orchard."

"Nothing could please me better, sir."

"Have you a camp-bed?"

"No, sir, but I can sleep in my valise."

The mess was finishing rice pudding and tinned apricots.

"I can lend you a bed, padre."

This was from Captain Griggs, and Gurney's face lit up, and these two men smiled upon each other.

"Thank you, but I shall be quite comfortable on the grass. Thank you very much, all the same."

The mess looked at him a little more attentively.

"Gurney will need a batman, Griggs," said the colonel.

"No, sir, really. I can look after myself."

"What about boots, padre, and shaving-water?"

"I sometimes clean my own boots. I can."

There was a little laugh, but with him, not against him Gurney may not have known it, but he was making progress.

"But what about the shaving-water, padre?"

Gurney smiled. "Yes, that would be rather a problem."

"Smith," sang a voice, "Mr. Gurney wants his sweet."

"Yessir."

The colonel was filling a pipe. "I think you had better have a batman, Gurney."

"I will be guided by you, sir."

"Detail a man, Griggs, will you? What about Honneyset?"

Captain Griggs was emphatic upon the subject of Private Honneyset.

"No, not Honneyset, sir. My chap, Bannister, can look after both of us, anyhow for the time being."

Smith placed a plate of rice and apricots before Gurney, and Gurney thanked him.

"Have some more beer, padre? We've got a barrel in stock."

This was from Toms, the Quartermaster, who acted as mess-president.

"Thank you," said Gurney, "I think I will have some more beer."

John Gurney, assisted by Private Bannister, spent the afternoon in settling into his tent. It was pitched in a grassy aisle between the apple trees, and Gurney kept putting his head out of the tent to look at these lovely trees. Bannister had produced a camp-bed, though Gurney had refused it, but he accepted it now, and not under protest.

"Where did you get it, Bannister?"

"Captain Griggs, sir."

"It is very kind of Captain Griggs."

"He's an A.1. Sport, sir."

Bannister was a fair boy with Sussex blue eyes, and a fallacious air of innocence. He disappeared, to return with a camp table and an empty sugar-box. He placed the table beside Gurney's bed. Gurney had been unloading some of his belongings on to the bed.

"A table, Bannister! Quite a luxury. Does that also come from Captain Griggs?"

"Yes, sir."

Gurney placed his Bible on the table, and Bannister took note of it.

"Got a canvas basin and bucket, sir?"

"I believe so."

"A tin mug?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"I'll have to scrounge one."

"What does scrounge mean exactly, Bannister?"

"Borrow, sir," said the fair boy, with a grin.

The sugar-box was to serve as a dressing-table and a chest of drawers. Bannister spread a ground-sheet beside the bed, pushed his cap back, and looked about him.

"All ship-shape, sir. But, gosh, you've got no chair."

"I can sit on the bed, Bannister."

"Must have a chair, sir. I'll go and borrow one from Madame."

He disappeared, to return with a cane-bottomed chair, and a triumphant grin.

"Got it, sir."

"How did you manage, Bannister?"

"Oh, just scrounged it."

"But won't the French lady miss it?"

"I'll make it all right with her, sir. She doesn't do so badly out of us."

Gurney smiled. "It seems very peaceful here, Bannister. I haven't heard a gun. How far are we from the front line?"

"Oh, about three miles, sir. Jerry's been quiet these last few days. Which means the old blighter is saving up something nasty."

When everything was garnished and in order, with Gurney's shaving-mirror suspended from the tent-pole, Gurney took his chair and Bible out into the orchard and sat down to meditate and consider his impressions. He had come to Abele Farm feeling a superfluous nobody, but maybe he was feeling a little less of a nobody. Yes, his duty was to convince these other men that he was man and not a clerical excrescence. The chill of the first plunge had passed, and Gurney sat in the sunlight between the trees, and felt a hopeful warmth spreading through him. He opened his Bible, but he did not read it. The inward book in him sufficed for the moment.

He could write home now, to Her, to Mr. Slade and to George. No longer was he a wandering Jew. He had an address, and by the Lord God Almighty he would try to keep it.

Actually, Gurney fell asleep in the orchard of Abele Farm, for he had passed two or three nights in the rough while on transit to his final destination. He had abandoned Madame's chair for the grass, with his haversack stuffed with a towel under his head, and his Bible beside him, and that was how Captain Griggs

found him, like a child asleep in the sun. Captain Griggs stood, for a moment, looking down at him and his Bible, and finding himself attracted by Gurney's peaceful and sleeping face. There was something unusual about this little priest, a simplicity, a serene naturalness that made you wonder.

Geoffrey Griggs was about to turn away and leave Gurney to his dreams, when John Gurney's eyes opened and looked up at this other man. A smile lit up Gurney's face like the sudden smile on the face of a very young child.

"Oh, it's you! I'm afraid I've been asleep."

"Why not?"

Gurney sat up. "I have to thank you for that bed."

"What about rheumatism, padre?"

"Why rheumatism?"

"That grass. Isn't it damp?"

"I don't think so."

"Then I'll try it."

Captain Griggs sat down, with stout legs crossed The muscles bulged under the puttees.

"Not too bad. Pleasant spot—this."

"Lovely," said Gurney, "you wouldn't think the war was so near."

"Quite near enough. Your first experience?"

"Yes."

"It feels a bit funny at first, you know."

"I suppose it does. Is it easy to find one's way up to the line?"

"Quite easy."

"I shall be able to go up to-morrow. I am looking forward to it—tremendously."

Captain Griggs, one hand grasping a hairy wrist, gazed steadfastly upon John Gurney.

"Is that—your—idea, padre?"

Gurney looked innocently surprised. "Why, of course. That's why I came out here. I want to go up the line every day."

A peculiar smile came into Geoffrey Griggs's eyes.

"You had better be shown around the first time or two, you know."

"I suppose I might get lost?"

"Nasty places here and there. Green heads get shot at."

"I'm afraid I'm very green."

"I shouldn't say that. I am going up to one of the aid-posts to-morrow to see a pal."

"Can I come with you?"

"If you feel like it."

"Thanks, most awfully."

Captain Griggs, who acted as adjutant, left Gurney for the Orderly Room where he had letters to sign, and in so thoughtful a mood that he missed both the sergeant-major and the sergeant-major's salute as he crossed the courtyard. Madame, sewing at her window, smiled upon him, and Captain Griggs did not see her smile. As the most popular and trusted officer of the Field Ambulance Captain Griggs might have been soused in smiles, but hands in pockets, freckled face mooning in the sunlight, he was absorbed in the strange innocence of Gurney. Yes, there was no doubt about it, the little padre did want to go up the line, and every day, damn it! His face had lit up like a boy's at the prospect of an exciting party.

Gurney was washing his hands in his canvas basin. Captain Griggs had told him that tea was at 4.30, and Gurney's wristwatch made the time 4.15.

Geoffrey Griggs, having signed what there was to sign, made for the mess, and found Captain Smart alone in his glory, censoring letters and very casually so. Captain Smart was apt to be slack upon detail, save in the matter of dress.

"Hullo, Fatty. What do you think of the little geezer?"

"What little geezer?"

"Our new priest, of course."

Captain Griggs frowned. There were occasions when the facetiousness and the debonairness of Captain Smart annoyed him.

"He's not a little geezer."

"Feeling fatherly?"

Captain Griggs sat down and rocked his chair. If Smart was not careful he would get his backside kicked one day.

"Going up the line with me to-morrow."

"I see. Pushing his face into it, are you?"

"No, I'm not. His idea. Wants to go up the line every day."

"Go up every day?"

"Yes."

"Christ, the silly little boob! He'll soon get cured of that."

Captain Smart opened a letter and glanced at it perfunctorily. Captain Griggs was still rocking his chair.

"Casual brute, aren't you, Smarty?"

"What, me?"

"Yes, you. I'll bet you a new pair of breeches he goes up every day."

Captain Smart scribbled on an envelope and tossed it aside.

"I'm on. I haven't recovered yet from Bluett."

XXV

IT was a very peaceful morning, and Gurney's impressions of the day were in time with nature; the larks singing up above were conscious of no war. Captain Griggs and Gurney followed a field path beside a canal whose waters were as placid as the sky. The green world was lushing up. Aspen trees kept up a sibilant tremolo, and their shadows flickered on the water and the grass. They crossed a bridge, and came out upon a country road with one-storied cottages dotted along it. French peasants were still living here. Gurney saw a man in blue trousers hoeing in a field. They passed a cottage with a big lilac bush in flower.

Said Gurney: "How very peaceful everything is."

Captain Griggs pulled a face. He might have said: "Yes, much

too peaceful. Me no likee," for such periods of peace could end in sudden frightfulness.

"When Jerry is quiet, he may be up to tricks."

Gurney had paused to smell the lilac which hung over the white fence.

"Do you see many Germans?"

"Just one in six months."

"Only one! How very——"

"Wounded prisoner. Nasty great swaggering brute What about loving one's enemies, padre?"

"One should pity them."

"Sorry. Nothing doing on my side. One doesn't love people who let off gas."

They followed the quiet, sunny road. A Frenchwoman came out of a cottage, and smiled upon Geoffrey Griggs.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur le Capitaine.*"

Griggs touched the peak of his cap, and passed on.

"The last cottage."

"Why does she live there?"

Captain Griggs grinned to himself.

"Ask me another. For the good of the troops. She calls herself a patient of ours. I leave her to Smart."

Gurney looked puzzled. "She must have great courage."

Captain Griggs suppressed an explosion. "Oh, undoubtedly, padre, undoubtedly, but she's not quite a St. Joan."

More trees, red thorns that would soon be in flower; an orchard that had a somewhat dishevelled look as though a storm had swept over it, and torn off some of its branches and left others hanging. There were things in that orchard, funny-looking arbor-like structures, but no men in brown. Gurney gazed at them.

"Gun-pits, padre."

They moved on under the shade of the thorns. Red May, so near to death and to fear! How strange, how sweetly strange! God must have spared these trees.

Then Gurney saw something else, beyond the trees, queer-

looking V-shaped structures, like the ribs of overturned ships. The sky showed through them, and suddenly Gurney understood. Those were houses, roofless houses, cobwebs of wood, tileless and dead. He was silent.

They came to another road, a different kind of road. There was something sinister about it. The sun shone, but this was a ghost road. It seemed very open to the sky, unpleasantly so. Queer nets decorated with ribbons were strung along part of it. The stillness and emptiness were challenging.

"We begin here," said Captain Griggs, and walked quickly across the road to the opening of a shallow communication trench, and Gurney followed him. Yes, there was a difference here other than the mere change in the surroundings. What was it exactly? Fear? This was the land of fear. They were waist-deep in the trench, and on one side a fence of wire-netting shut them in. How frail was this barrier and this screen! It seemed strange to be walking with the green growth level with your waist, and this wilderness stretching away towards the sky-line. Grass, weeds, water, a melancholy flatness, and over yonder the dry bones of those slaughtered houses. An eerie silence seemed to press upon this level country, a silence that was almost solid.

Gurney became aware of a quickening of Captain Griggs's pace. The trench bottom had dried up. There were yellow buttercups close to Gurney's hand. He put it out and touched them as he passed.

He asked a simple question. "Why this wire fence?"

Captain Griggs's voice came back over his shoulder. It, too, had a difference, though Griggs may not have realized it, the quietness of this haunted, sun-lit desolation.

"To inspire one with the illusion that we can't be seen."

"Can we?"

"Well, yes, I expect so. In the summer the grass and the weeds get up high and provide more cover. Besides, we're just two, and not worth a shell."

Gurney was smiling. How strange and pleasant to be in sight

of the enemy. Almost he wished for the compliment of being shot at.

"I think they might give me my baptism."

Captain Griggs paused for a second and looked round into Gurney's face. It was smiling.

"Better not ask for such favours, padre, or we may get it."

They went on. They came to the place where the wire was not, and a low bank of earth took its place. Here was a notice-board standing awry and scrawled on with chalk:

KEEP YOUR HEADS DOWN.

THOSE WHO LOVE LIFE DON'T LOITER.

Captain Griggs looked back, and somehow his face was different, set and stern.

"Can you read, padre?"

"Yes."

"Well, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Green heads have to be educated."

Beyond them lay a gap in the earth wall, and Captain Griggs bent low and did not loiter in the crossing, and Gurney followed him. The trench grew deeper, the walls higher. They turned a corner and came suddenly upon life, men sitting with their backs to the rampart, smoking, cleaning equipment, or just doing nothing. Gurney felt thrilled. His first Tommies actually in the trenches! He smiled upon them, especially upon one lad who was picking lice out of a shirt. Gurney would have liked to stop and speak to these men, but Captain Griggs ploughed on. He seemed to be in a hurry, for Captain Griggs, though Gurney did not know it, had one of those windy moods upon him from which all men suffer. Moreover, he was somewhat fey, misliking this spell of tranquillity, and mistrusting it, and feeling tight in his tummy.

They took another trench that was banked high with sods, and here and there there were gaps in the banking which had not been repaired, and through one of these gaps Gurney saw two little mounds, and two wooden crosses. He stopped and stared. Those graves had a freshness.

"Two poor lads."

Captain Griggs faced about.

"Yes, come on, padre."

Gurney came on. There had been a slight rasp of impatience in his new friend's voice.

"Were they killed?"

"A month or so ago. Your predecessor should have buried them. He funked it."

"Then, did no one?"

"Yes, old Morgan came up and did the job."

Their last communication alley opened into a trench that crossed it at right angles, and suddenly Gurney realized that he was here. Men were strung along this trench, but they were armed men, rifles ready to their hands. They had queer, quiet, expressionless faces. There was a silence here. A young officer was peering through a periscope. Gurney smiled at these stolid faces, but only one of them smiled back at him. He heard something said as he squeezed along in Captain Griggs's wake.

"Another bloody sky-pilot."

These men did not seem very friendly to the Cloth.

They passed dug-outs, noisome-looking places. Then Captain Griggs turned sharply into a sap that ran backwards from the front line. They came to another dug-out, a more sumptuous affair, heavily sandbagged, and with a red cross sign fixed beside the entrance. Captain Griggs dived inside.

"Hallo, Squib."

"Hallo, old man."

Gurney stooped and peered in. He saw a man lying on a stretcher, two others sitting on a bench, an officer writing at an improvised table, two orderlies standing by. The medical officer had a little, thin, pale face, and his eyes looked tired and frightened.

"Come in, padre. This is Captain Harker. Squib, our new padre. Come up to see the life."

The M.O. smiled. Somehow, his face looked wrinkled and old.

"Come in, padre."

Griggs sat down on a box. "Anything doing?"

"No, quiet as hell."

Gurney was amused. He had imagined hell to be a somewhat noisy place.

"All right for dressings, etc.?"

"Quite."

Captain Griggs was tapping his leg with his cane He appeared restless.

"Anything you want?"

"Whisky is a little short. Could you manage——?"

"I'll try. I thought your C.O. was a cellar-merchant."

"Something went wrong with our last case."

"Bad luck. Well, we'll be getting along. I'm looking in at Cherry Château."

"Lucky let-off for them last week."

"It was."

Captain Griggs got up. "Bye-bye, Squib."

"So long, old man. Cheerio, padre. Glad to see you any time."

"Thank you," said Gurney. "I hope you will see me often."

They left the aid post, and passed back along the sap. Captain Griggs was walking fast. He had that nasty feeling on him, and a man did not loiter unless there was an actual job to do. Strangely enough, Captain Griggs's unpleasant sense of premonition was to prove prophetic. They were half-way up the sap when the thing happened. They seemed to Gurney like sudden, sharp claps of thunder over yonder, strange screamings in the air, explosions, fountains of dirt going up.

Captain Griggs went flat.

"Get down, padre, get down."

But, Gurney did not get down. He stood as though paralysed, listening, looking. There was strange tension in his tummy. He seemed to be standing in the midst of a noisy and catastrophic earthquake, bewildered yet alert. Captain Griggs, flat on his tummy, could have told him that this was what was called a

shell-storm, but a clod of earth had arrived on Captain Griggs's back and winded him, and he was wondering whether it was something worse.

Scattered soil hit Gurney in the face. He saw that the sap was blocked with earth ahead of them. Then, the guns switched suddenly to the left. Captain Griggs turned over and sat up, feeling his back. His face looked grey. And just as suddenly his eyes seemed to bulge in a shocked stare.

"My God, the aid-post!"

Gurney turned and looked, and saw a jumble of dishevelled sandbags. The post had been hit, and in that moment something came alive in John Gurney. Almost it seemed to be another person in him that ran towards that wrecked dug-out. He could hear cries coming from it. "Oh, my God, help, Oh, my God, my God!" Those men were buried in there, smothered under the caved-in roof and walls, and that bitter cry roused John Gurney to a kind of blind frenzy. He began to tear and scrabble at the fallen sandbags like a dog in a rabbit-hole. He just didn't hear Captain Griggs's voice, and Captain Griggs, having given him one astonished stare, turned about and ran. He scrambled over the mess of earth and up the sap to where men were crouching against the parapet.

"Help, you fellows, the aid-post has been hit!"

When Griggs and his rescue party crowded down the sap they saw a strange sight, a backside and a pair of squirming legs. That wild little tyke Gurney had managed to tear and scratch a hole in the debris, and was wriggling his way in. The men with picks and spades stood for a moment, blankly staring.

"Who the bloody 'ell is that?"

"Is he comin' out or goin' in?"

Captain Griggs pushed a cap back from a white and sweating forehead.

"That, my lads, is our new padre, and he's going in."

At that very moment the backside and kicking legs disappeared. Gurney was in.

Griggs inserted his head and shoulders into the hole.

"Padre."

"Get a light," said a voice. "I can't see."

"Look out, old man, it may cave in—worse."

"Get me light," said the voice with a kind of fierceness.

Captain Griggs wriggled into the hole.

"Shove me, you fellows. Padre, I'm coming in. We'll get some light."

Captain Griggs was pushed like a torpedo into its tube. There was silence, the sound of a match being struck, and then a voice.

"Hullo, out there."

"Yes, sir."

"Enlarge that hole. Be careful. Half the roof's down. Take as little as you can, or we'll be sunk."

The men began slowly and carefully to clear away the debris. They heard voices within. "Poor old Squib, afraid he's a gonner. Hold on there, lad. We'll get you out."

The men outside worked with a furious, concentrated carefulness. The hole grew larger, and the light streamed in.

"Come on inside, just two of you. We want a lift here."

Two men crawled in.

They had recovered both the living and the dead from that tragic mess and had laid them in the sap, when the German guns switched back. Gurney, bare-headed, was kneeling beside the body of Captain Harker. Griggs and the man went flat or pressed themselves against the sap wall, but Gurney remained kneeling, lips moving, hands together.

"Padre," said Griggs, "get down."

Gurney either did not or would not hear him.

"God!" said one of the Tommies, "this bloody padre is a bit of all-right."

The shell-storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. There were two dead men in the sap, two wounded, two who were "shocked". Captain Griggs was attending to the wounded, and Gurney still kneeling by the dead when two officers came

scrambling over the fallen earth, the battalion colonel and adjutant.

Now, Gurney had no idea of the mess he was in. He had a dirty face, wild hair, earth all over his clothes. The colonel, a very tall man, glanced with a kind of shrinking compassion at poor Harker. He looked so small and white and crushed. And who was the fellow kneeling by him? The colonel turned to Captain Griggs.

"A bad business, this."

Griggs rose from his knees. He too was very dirty.

"Yes, sir, a direct hit. Ghastly bad luck."

The colonel nodded at the kneeling figure. "Who's that?"

"Padre Gurney, sir. He went in alone after the men, just scratched his way in like a terrier."

"Did he!" said the colonel. "You were in too, by the look of you."

"Yes, but the padre was in first."

The colonel went and laid a hand on Gurney's shoulder. "Thank you, padre. You did a damned brave thing."

Gurney looked up and smiled. "Well, I couldn't help it, sir. Those poor fellows in there."

The colonel turned to his adjutant. "We shall want to report on this. Get all the details, yes, particularly about—the padre."

It was some time later in the afternoon when two very tired and dirty men walked into the courtyard of Abele Farm. Stretcher-bearers had carried the wounded and the shocked to the A.D.S., and thence a motor-ambulance had brought them to Headquarters. They had had a tale to tell.

"It was the padre who got us out."

Men were standing about, and when they saw these two dirty figures a sort of cheer went up. Captain Griggs looked annoyed. "Oh, shut up, you fellows."

Colonel Bruce and two other officers came to the window of the mess. Colonel Bruce was sporting his ginger-grin. He

watched those two earth-stained men circle the great manure pit.

"Well, padre, you seem to have run right into it, on the first occasion."

Then his grin died away.

"A stiff whisky and a wash. Come in."

He did not say that they had done damned well, but he put out a hand and drew Gurney up the steps and into the room. Captain Griggs followed. He flopped down in a chair, stretched his legs out, and was silent. He was all-in, and haunted by poor Harker's bleached little face.

"Damn it, someone give me a drink. And tell Bannister I want a bucket of hot water."

"Yessir," said Smith.

"And tell him he'd better clean up the padre first."

XXVI

JOHN GURNEY fell asleep in his tent with the feeling that he could sleep the clock round, but the night was not to be so completely peaceful. He dreamed; he dreamed that he had been buried alive and was struggling and stifling, and in the midst of this night-terror he woke up. He was shivering; he had his blankets over his head, and he thrust them off and sat up. His heart was beating fast and hard, and suddenly he realized that the elemental man in him had been frightened It was quaking, and the camp-bed quaked with it. Had he been scared to death in that dreadful trench? Well, yes, for a second or two, until he had realized—— And heard those piteous cries.

Gurney put his hands to his head and prayed, and there was thankfulness in his praying.

"Thank God, for letting it happen to me like that. I might have run away. Please God, give me courage, always."

He lay down again, and a strange peace descended upon him. He had not done so badly. He had shown these other men that he was no Bluett. And She would have no cause to be ashamed of him. Should he tell her about it? But that would be showing off. And presently he fell asleep again, profoundly at peace, nor did he hear a blackbird singing in the dawn, nor the farm noises, nor the voices of men. Sometime about half-past seven Private Bannister slipped into the tent with a cup of early tea and three slices of bread and butter, and gently he woke Gurney.

"Early tea, sir."

Gurney blinked at him. "Why, Bannister, how very kind of you."

"Glad to be of any use, sir. You're to stay in bed and sleep it out. Colonel's orders, sir."

Gurney drank his tea and ate his bread and butter, and went happily to sleep again. He did not wake until the sun was high. Someone was sitting by his bed.

"Well, Gurney, had a good sleep?"

John Gurney looked up into the face of Major Morgan.

"Hullo, sir. I'm afraid I'm—neglecting duty."

Gurney sat up and Major Morgan put out a big hand and pushed him back again.

"Hardly that, Gurney! I've heard all about it. Well, I was right, you know."

"About what, sir?"

"About you, my lad. By the way, it is the special wish of the Surreys that you should bury those poor fellows."

"Thank you, sir. I wish it had been otherwise."

There was a little war cemetery in the orchard west of the ruined village, and there Gurney read the burial service over Captain Harker and the men who had died with him. It was a very simple service, with the guns silent, and the larks singing overhead. The battalion colonel and adjutant, and two other officers and a dozen men stood beside the graves while Gurney read the service for the burial for the dead.

When the service was over, the colonel went to shake hands with John Gurney.

"Thank you, padre. I have never heard it read more to my liking. Come up and have lunch with us in the mess."

"With pleasure, sir."

"By the way, I am putting in a recommendation—on what you did."

"Are you, sir? Very good of you, but I only did what——"

"Yes, just that, padre. But we don't always do what we might have done."

"No, sir. I might have run away."

The colonel smiled at him quizzically in spite of the sadness of the occasion, and Gurney retired behind an apple tree and unrobed himself, and stuffed the vestments into a haversack. The headquarters mess was a sandbagged structure built into the interior of a farmhouse in the derelict village. The colonel and Gurney strolled together up the village street, and from one of the roofless cottages a black cat suddenly appeared, meowed, and rubbed against Gurney's legs.

"Well, if that isn't an omen, padre!"

Gurney bent down and stroked the creature. "I hope so, sir."

"Even the cats salute you!"

Three other officers were gathered in the mess, including Lieut. Hornblower who had been detailed to act as temporary M.O. in place of poor Harker. Their glances were friendly. Gurney was very much man among them.

"Hullo, padre, it's good to see you."

"Come and squat."

Gurney was given the seat on the colonel's right. He was a guest of honour. He felt that he had received promotion.

Smith was laying tea when Gurney returned, and Smith, like all other plain men, had become bright and polite to Mr. Gurney.

"Hope you feel rested, sir."

"Yes, Smith, thank you."

"Post's in, sir. Letters for you."

Gurney's eyes lit up. "That's good news. Where are they, Smith?"

"Over there, sir, on the side-table."

Gurney went and looked and saw Her writing. Well, well, well, if this wasn't the climax of a halcyon day! And there was another letter; it looked like Mr. Slade. Gurney gathered them up, and slipped them into a tunic pocket. He was caught in the act by Captain Griggs.

"Hullo, padre! Letters?"

Did Geoffrey Griggs imagine it, or did Gurney blush?

The reading of such letters was a private affair, and after tea Gurney carried them to his tent in the orchard, and sat down on his camp-bed with a letter on either knee. Which should he open first? Mr. Slade's was the choice, for Gurney was just a little afraid of that other letter, because it could mean so much to him. Mr. Slade's letter was cheery and chatty, with all the local news, and ended with the information that his friends in Southfleet were missing him. How strange, but Mr. Slade's letter made John Gurney feel homesick, though it could not be said that Southfleet had been very kind to him. He had a sudden longing for the cliffs and the pier, and Caroline Terrace and its gardens, and the church, and the funny old front of the Old Town. Yes, and the cricket-ground and his lads, and his roses at Vine Cottage, and the white house with the green shutters and Her.

He looked at her letter. Would it be formal; would it be disappointing? Almost, Gurney's hands trembled as he opened the envelope. He unfolded the sheet and read.

"*My dear John*——"

Gurney experienced a thrill.

Her dear John!

If only he could be her dear John? But was not that presumption?

But what a letter! It seemed to slip at once into an easy, and happy intimacy. She asked for all the news. Was he settled some-

where, and did he like his new post? It could not be said that there were any profundities in her letter, but that was of no concern. Almost, she prattled to him as a woman talks over her work, and this was the very essence of a confidence that sank straight and deep into Gurney's consciousness. She wrote to him as if—— But, oh, wasn't he assuming too much? And she was sending him a parcel as soon as she received his permanent address. He was to tell her of anything that he needed.

Gurney did a ridiculous and boyish thing, he put her letter to his lips. Yes, her hand must have rested there.

And then he had an inspiration. Dared he ask her for a photograph? He did not quite know whether he had the audacity.

But that evening, while the mess was playing Bridge, he sat down and wrote to her and to her father.

And he did dare. Would she send him her photograph? As an afterthought and as a sop to the conventions, he asked also for a photograph of George.

Gurney did not think of himself as a hero, for man's heroic age is past. No longer does he wear fine feathers and go upon colourful adventure, tossing a spear at the dawn, laughing and gay and splendid in the shining armour of youth. That strange creature —modern man—has so muddled up his clever little gadgets that he can never be sure whether he is taking a bomb or a hot-water bottle to bed with him. His very wars have become shabby affairs, mere muck and misery, blood and torn entrails. Fear has spread black wings over the world, and Gurney felt and understood that fear, and somehow realized that life's business of the moment was to challenge and conquer Fear. Love had to come back into the world, and faith, and compassion for one's neighbour.

So, in all humility, Gurney set out daily upon his pilgrimage, confronting fear in his own person, for he discovered that there were occasions when fear gripped him. No longer was he the innocent visitor to those trenches and holes in the ground. That one incident had left its raw surface, and Gurney was to experi-

ence the dreadful and horrid reactions of crude, primitive emotion. He was sensitive; he had imagination. He knew that mutilation and bloody disaster might be waiting for him round some corner, but the spirit of him set itself towards a silent selflessness. He could and would say—"Sometimes I am a fearful man, but I will not sacrifice to fear."

So, he went everywhere, exploring that world of ditches and dug-outs until nearly every corner of it was familiar to him. He would appear in the most unexpected places, front-line trenches, listening-posts, gun-pits, cook-houses, company messes, aid-posts. Usually he carried a packet or two of cigarettes with him, but he carried much more than that, a smile, a light that suggested a halo, a simple sincerity and a naturalness that could not be denied. To hundreds of men he became a familiar figure, welcomed, saluted, smiled at. Probably he did not know the name by which they had christened him, "The Front Line Padre".

Sometimes he and Major Morgan joined in these pilgrimages, nor was there any jealousy between them. The Welshman seemed to lack the negativeness of the Anglo-Saxon, and the sterility that compensates itself with malice. Gurney was learning to laugh, even at men whom the Major could describe as "Awkward Brutes", and awkward they could be, full of grousings and surliness, but as Morgan put it: "They are our soil, and in them we have to plant the seed." For, this Welshman had the subtlety of the serpent. He knew that most men never grow up, and have to be cajoled, flattered, scolded and slapped like children. At home, was not another Welshman to discover that munition workers had to be bribed, and their war-effort sugared?

But Gurney went his own way. His work was, in a sense, experimental, an exploring of the body and soul of man. He had rebuffs and he had successes. The thing was to smile and cultivate compassion. Tough cynics might ask: "What does the little fellow think men are? Bloody saints?" Gurney thought nothing of the kind. He was becoming catholic in his humanity. Did men scrounge, and skimshank and snarl over food, and spend five francs on love, and curse sergeant-majors and some of their

officers, and sulk? Of course they did. But they stuck in the trenches, they endured, they wrote letters home, and often they were unselfish letters, concealing ugly truths. "I'm in the pink." "I'm feeling champion." Gurney found the balance well on the credit side. The debits were just human nature.

Pausing one day outside an aid-post he heard voices, shouts, curses. What disharmony was this? There had been desultory shelling, and Gurney had caught a splodge of earth on his cap. Tin-hats had not yet come in. He put his head in to explore. He saw a large, burly creature with a red and rather brutal face, lying on a stretcher, and fighting off an orderly, and an angry M.O.

"Blast yer bloody eyes. Keep yer—'ands off me. I don't want yer muckin' me about. Got it in the guts, 'ave I? Bloody 'ell! Get art!"

The man was like a wild creature, shocked, and quite out of control. He cursed and struggled and snarled. The angry M.O. was trying to give him a dig of morphia, but the fellow knocked the hypodermic out of his hand.

"All right, you fool, lie and rot. Get some bearers, Jones. We'll tie him on a stretcher and send him down."

Gurney walked in, and the M.O. glared at him.

"Hullo, padre, better keep out of here, unless you want to hear foul language."

"I don't mind," said Gurney, and sat down on a box beside the man on the stretcher.

The fellow had wits enough to recognize him. "What'o, the bloody padre."

Gurney laid a hand on one of the man's hands, and had it flung off.

"You damn' well leave me alone. I don't want to be messed about by a bloody little parson."

Gurney smiled at him. "Of course you don't. Have a fag."

He produced a packet of cigarettes, and stuck one into the coarse mouth, and the coarse mouth accepted it. Gurney lit a match, and held it to the white tube.

"Glad to be in here. I was feeling a little windy."

He lit himself a cigarette. The man stared at him.

"You—a bit windy!"

"Yes."

"Garn, tell me another."

The joke seemed a good one, and the fellow laughed. "No bloody funk about you, old sport."

"No, not quite that."

The fellow went on laughing.

He smoked, and in a little while Gurney was stroking his head, while the M.O. and the orderly, pretending to be busy with other matters, observed the miracle. It was as though Gurney had cast the devil out of the man, and so soothed and calmed him that he lay still, with his eyes closed, and the end of the cigarette hanging from his lower lip. Gurney leaned over and gently removed it. The fellow murmured something, and Gurney bent to listen.

" 'Old my 'and, sir."

Gurney grasped a dirty paw. "I'm not goin' to die, sir, am I?"

"No, of course not. Take it easy, keep still. They'll soon have you in hospital."

Actually, the man fell asleep, holding on to Gurney's hand, and when the stretcher-bearers came for him, he went like a lamb.

The M.O., grinning, but faintly peeved, addressed Gurney.

"Bit of a wizard, aren't you, padre. Bottle of morphia on legs."

Gurney was cleaning his cap. "No. I think the poor fellow was frightened. He wanted a mother."

"I wonder what Ma would have made of his nice language?"

"Just a baby squawling."

"I see. Just like that!"

Gurney, returning to Abele Farm, found, for a contrast, a letter from Her. The envelope seemed bigger and stouter than usual, and suddenly Gurney became excited. Was it possible that she had sent him her picture? He sneaked off to his tent, closed the flap, sat down on his bed, and opened the envelope.

There was a photo. There were two photos, one of Her, and one of George. Gurney just glanced at the boy's and then sat gazing at her. She smiled at him. What a kind and lovely smile she had! And her hair, and her eyes!

Gurney read her letter. She had had this photograph taken—for him. She spoke playfully of the others being out of date and girlish. "I'm a mature matron, you know." Mature matron indeed! And then she wrote that she had no picture of him, and was it possible for him to be photographed in uniform?

Possible? It would be a divine duty. Then Gurney resumed his contemplation of her face. So absorbed was he that he did not notice the movement of the tent-flap. Captain Griggs looked in, grinned, carefully reclosed the canvas, and with exaggerated caution, stole away. Nor did he make a joke of it in the mess.

XXVII

THE war had as yet cast no considerable shadow upon South-fleet, and the holiday crowds did not appear to have diminished. Mr. Slade experienced no slump in the sale of toys. Mr. Sawkins was accepting officers and officers' wives at the Caroline Hotel, and charging them as much as he dared and calling it his war service. That there were sad and troubled faces goes without saying, and Mrs. Corrie Richmond's was one of them. Her beloved Charles had joined the R.A.M.C. and been sent to Gallipoli among officer reinforcements. Mr Slade, when passing along Caroline Terrace, raised his hat to the house, a peculiar gesture, and uttered an inward prayer:

"May her boy be spared."

Mr. Sawkins, that expert snooper, observed this hat-lifting ritual, and was puzzled by it. Why should a man raise his hat to nobody at the same spot each morning? Did some elderly

female sit at a window and wait for the passing of old Slade?

A clash occurred, one of the many. Mr. Sawkins, playing Nosy Parker, strolled out to confront Mr. Slade at the moment when he passed the Richmond house. Mr. Slade raised his hat as usual, but all the windows were blank, nor could Mr. Sawkins assume that the courtesy was intended for him.

"'Morning, Slade."

"'Morning, Sawkins."

Mr. Sawkins paused, with a superior smirk. "Any news of little Gurney?"

Mr. Slade fixed a stare upon Mr. Sawkins's beard 'Yes, he's in the thick of things, and liking it."

"You don't mean to say he's up in the trenches?"

"That *is* the very place where Gurney would be."

"Think so? I can't see what use a little parson like that would be."

"Obviously."

"Why obviously?"

"I mean, from your standpoint, Sawkins," and Mr. Slade passed on.

Meanwhile, Gurney's Division had been taken out of the line, and withdrawn to a back area to rest and act as army reserve. Gurney was sorry to leave Abele Farm and his tent in the orchard, but at Merville he found himself in a pleasant billet, and next door to a professional photographer. He was photographed, both alone and in a group of Field Ambulance officers, and sitting on the right of the colonel. Obvious, Gurney belonged. He conducted services at Merville, but "Conduct" was not quite the right word, for the men listened to his simple and sincere sermons, and sang the hymns with heartiness. Gurney was not only "The Front Line Padre"; he was a man who had a genius for being a man with men. On two evenings a week he held what might be described as a "Private Confessional". Men brought their troubles to him, domestic or otherwise, and he did his best to play Solomon. Moreover, he was becoming known to all

and sundry. Not only did obscure Tommies salute him in the streets, but they would add a "Good morning, sir," which was outside the regulations. But so was Gurney. He did things which sticklers for conformity might have boggled over, but to Gurney was allowed the licence of a man who was trusted and treated with affection.

Captain Griggs was a great horseman, the other officers less so, and Captain Griggs held Horse Parades, and took his flock for a canter in the glades of the Forest of Nieppe. Gurney was persuaded to join them, and took a toss on some boggy turf and landed in a puddle. Captain Griggs and the others did their best to clean him up, but he had to bump home looking distinctly soiled.

"Never mind, padre, it's the only toss you have ever taken."

Gurney could laugh and say: "I'll try again another day. But, I must confess, Geoffrey, that I'm rather sore."

"Vanity, or backside?"

"Backside, I'm afraid."

Captain Griggs painted him with iodine.

It was two days after this painful incident that the wonderful thing happened. Major Morgan turned up at the mess looking as though he had a pet puppy tucked away under his tunic.

"I have a piece of news for you, Gurney."

"Have you, sir?"

"How would you like a little piece of ribbon?"

Gurney looked coy. "Are you pulling my leg, sir?"

"I am not. You have been awarded the M.C."

Gurney went pink with surprise and pleasure.

"The M.C.? I really don't know why, sir."

"Oh, stow it, padre. Don't be so filthily modest."

But the mess rose to the occasion. Captain Griggs made a back, and Captains Smart and Ryder hoisted Gurney on to Geoffrey Griggs's shoulders, and Gurney and his mount careered around the room to cheers that were not ironic, and though such behaviour may appear silly and sentimental to the coldly clever, it is an exhibit to be found among men. They made so much

noise that passers-by paused to peer in. How these English did make a joke of everything!

Said Major Morgan: "Shall I read the book of the words?"

Gurney had slid down, and was on his feet. "No, please don't."

"Oh, modest child. Look at him blushing."

"I am," said Gurney.

Major Morgan laid a typescript on the table, and the Mess crowded over the slip of paper.

For showing great courage and devotion in rescuing men from a dangerous dug-out that had received a direct hit from a shell—etc.——

"All in the book of the words, padre. Buckingham Palace for you."

"And dinner with the General, Gurney. I have been asked to convey the invitation to you. It is for to-night."

Gurney stood looking out of the window. He was thinking how this wonderful piece of news might interest particular people at home, and suddenly these other men grew silent. Padre Gurney was alone for the moment with himself, and perhaps with God.

Gurney dined at the General's Mess. He had Major Morgan with him as a friend and supporter, but Gurney began by being very shy, particularly so as he was placed on the great man's right. What did you say to Generals? What did such eminent souls talk about? Though, of course, you waited for the great man to favour you with a remark and then struggled to make some appropriate reply. John Gurney began by being modest and mute, nor did the General like him any the less for that. Your pert and breezy conversationalist may be looked on askance by men, who, when at home, use their hands more than their tongues.

But by some happy coincidence, and after the soup, someone mentioned cricket. Gurney perked up his ears. Were these gorgeous creatures interested in the game? Gurney found the General's eyes fixed on him, the blue eyes of a man who loved field-sports and the open country.

"I seem to have seen you before, somewhere, padre."

"I don't know where it could have been, sir."

The General appeared to be searching his memory.

"You don't happen to play cricket?"

"As a matter of fact I do, sir."

And suddenly the great man smiled. "By Jove, I believe I've got it. Did you ever play against The Harlequins?"

"I did, sir, once, for the Surrey Colts."

"Scorching day at Lords, in August."

"Yes, sir."

"By Jove, I remember. You were the damned little fellow who bowled googlies, and put me out for three."

"I'm very sorry, sir."

Gurney looked it, and the whole mess laughed.

But there was no more ice in the atmosphere. The General was off on the subject of cricket, and Gurney, recovering his confidence, joined him in the great game. Damn it, here was a padre who was a sportsman and who understood the graces of the game. In a little while Gurney was very much at his ease, but there was one thing that troubled him, his friend seemed out of the conversation. That was not good or right.

Did Major Morgan play football? He had done, very much so. He had played Rugger for Wales, and when Gurney set that ball rolling, it was kicked hither and thither by other men, who, perhaps, preferred football to cricket. The General listened benignly. He was not such a fool as to miss the point. Gurney had made an opening, and passed the ball to Major Morgan, so that his friend could score.

After a last whisky before turning in the General said to his G.S.O.1.: "Great little fellow, Gurney. We'll keep him. Good second to Morgan. I wonder if we could run a cricket-club in the Division?"

The G.S.O.1. was sceptical. French turf was more adapted to football than cricket.

"Well, I'd like to feel a bat in my hands again, Fairfax, even if it were only on a back-garden pitch."

"Why not put the padre on to it?"

"By Jove, that's an idea! He ought to have special leave, and while he's at home he might get hold of some gear. And he could bowl me some of his damned googlies. I'm going to play for the village again when this business is over."

Gurney confronted a problem, a very personal problem. Should he write to Her and tell her the news? But would not that look like showing-off, ostentatious swagger? Yes, it would be rather more delightful if she were to hear of it in some other way. So, he remained mute upon the subject of his decoration.

It was Mr. Slade who discovered it, at breakfast, while glancing through the morning paper. Somehow Gurney had become news, very much news. Mr. Slade let out a sound that was almost a whoop.

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

Rose looked at her father. What was there in the paper that could jigger him? "Why the excitement?"

Mr. Slade became suddenly shy. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Let me look."

"Oh, no, you don't, my dear. I'll give you three guesses."

"The miners have struck?"

"Cold, dead cold."

"Something about the war?"

"You're getting warmer."

"Something that concerns us?"

"Very much so."

"Pass over the paper."

"I haven't finished with it yet."

"You selfish old man."

She half-rose and reached across the table, but Mr. Slade dodged her.

"Oh, no, you don't, my dear. I'm still very interested."

"Please."

Mr. Slade had done enough teasing, and he sat back and smiled at his daughter.

"It's something about—John."

"John! In the paper?"

"Yes. He has won the Military Cross for gallantry and devotion."

"You're not joking?"

"Never more serious."

"How wonderful! Give me the paper."

Mr. Slade surrendered it.

He watched her reading that piece of news, and the way her face became soft and luminous. There was silence. Then, she laid the paper down, and stirred her tea.

"Why didn't he tell us?"

"Isn't that John Gurney all over?"

"Yes. Of course. It is."

But Mr. Slade had other uses for that paper. He was going to make a public parade with it, oh, very much so. He was going to swagger and crow and strut and chortle. He was going to stuff that sensation into Southfleet's mouth, and especially so into a particular mug. Yes, Mr. Slade was proposing to enjoy himself.

He felt jaunty and he looked it, his hat cocked, his face mischievous, the paper in his hand, and as luck would have it he was to meet quite a number of the necessary people. Miss Godbold was the first, rolling like a bladder of lard out of Cashiobury Terrace. Mr. Slade raised his hat and flapped the paper at the lady.

"Great piece of news this morning."

"Dear, dear, have we won a victory?"

"In a sense, yes. Mr. Gurney has won the Military Cross."

Miss Godbold's mouth opened like a fish's, and her chin wobbled.

"But—how—incredible!"

"Yes, isn't it. For exceptional gallantry and devotion to duty. I'm sure you are delighted."

And the naughty old man passed on.

In Caroline Terrace he happened upon Dr. Richmond getting into his car, and Mr. Slade brandished the paper at him.

"Southfleet's first war decoration, sir."

Dr. Richmond paused with his hand on the door. He did not read the paper at breakfast.

"Is that so. And who?"

"Mr. Gurney."

"Gurney!"

"Yes, the Military Cross."

"Well," said Dr. Richmond, "I'm damned glad."

Now, this little incident proved to be a bait to catch Mr. Slade's principal victim. Mr. Sawkins, upon his balcony, had witnessed the meeting and Mr. Slade's brandishing of the daily paper. Mr. Sawkins wondered if he had missed anything in the news, and as Mr. Slade passed, he hailed him.

"Anything important, Slade?"

"Very."

"Nothing in my paper. I'll change it. What——?"

"Southfleet has been honoured."

"How?"

"One of our boys has been decorated for gallantry. Great piece of work."

"Who?"

"Why, Mr. Gurney, of course. I had my money on him."

"Gurney?"

"Yes, Gurney!" and Mr. Slade shouted.

"I don't believe it."

"You—wouldn't," said Mr. Slade, and passed on.

Mr. Slade paraded the town after paying a visit to his shop.

"Girls, Mr. Gurney has won the Military Cross. We'll close early to-day. Half-a-day off."

He toddled down the High Street to Mr. Golightly's, but Mr. Golightly did not need informing; he had read the news and he and Mr. Slade shook hands over it.

"I feel like giving a party, sir."

"Well, why not?"

"To-night, at the Regent. Will Mrs. Golightly come?"

"Most certainly she will come."

"I'll get the vicar."

Mr. Golightly caressed his suave and polished chin, and dropped his voice into Mr. Slade's ear.

"But what about Emily?"

Mr. Slade looked shy. "I don't think Emily will want to celebrate. This—is a kind of judgment of Solomon."

Mr. Slade dashed off to the Regent Hotel to arrange for his party. He could not give the number of guests at the moment, but let the manager budget for a dozen. And champagne would be needed. Yes, the exact number should be settled by noon. What, of champagne bottles? No, guests. A bottle per person might be disastrous.

"Make it four, Mr. Randall."

"Four it shall be, sir, and my best."

Mr. Slade's next visit was to the Post Office, where he purchased two one pound notes and, returning to the shop, mailed them with a short letter to George.

"Mr. Gurney has won the Military Cross. Buy a new bat, and don't get indigestion."

Yet another call remained to be paid. Mr. Slade walked to the vicarage, wondering how Mr. Jones had received or would receive the news. It might be a testing of Egbert. As a matter of fact, Mr. Jones was one of those who had read the report, and he came very well out of the ordeal.

"This is—an honour to the town, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade shook Mr. Jones's hand with heartiness. "I'm giving a little party, sir, to-night, at the Regent. Will you join us?"

"Delighted, Mr. Slade."

"Splendid. And, Mrs. Jones?"

Mr. Jones looked down his nose. "My wife is not feeling very well."

"I'm sorry, sir. Convey her my condolences."

For, there had been a scene at breakfast. Mr. Jones had managed to appropriate Gurney's glory as a tribute to his own prescience, but Emily had not been pleased. For Emily had a feeling that in the game of "Scratch me and I'll Scratch Back", Gurney had cheated.

Southfleet's response to the news of Mr. Gurney's distinction was varied and peculiar. There were those who were not pleased, and who, like Mrs. Jones, felt that Gurney had played an unsporting trick on them and cheated. It was as though the little fellow had kept a card up his sleeve. For, when you have settled a man's reputation for him, it is impertinent of him to set about proving you wrong. Then, there were those who applauded, with a strange flavour of patronage. Their applause contained peculiar condescension. Pure pleasure over somebody else's success is a very rare reaction.

"Didn't think the little fellow had it in him."

For any singular success may be a slap to Mr. Everyman's secret self-esteem, and he must qualify it by assuming surprise, and patting with patronizing gusto the back of the hero. And strange as it may seem, Gurney's most condescending critics were working-men, especially those tinged with the new pink dye. Socialism, in its organic reality, is a revolt against success, the prejudice of the moiling many against the more distinguished few. More humbug has been spread like grease over the plain bread of the plain man's soul than its strenuous spreaders would ever dare to allow.

Mr. Robert Smiles, who was to become a very conscientious objector, had bitter things to say. This little parson was a humbug. He had taken a toff's bit of ribbon, and was justifying a capitalist's war. Mr. Smiles could utter hardly three sentences without dragging in "Cap-it-alism", and snarling at it like a little dog whose bone would never be big enough to please him. Mr. Smiles was an embryo-tyrant in tosh. He would never admit that an inferior heritage could prevent you from becoming superior to your superiors.

There were two people who were whole-heartedly pleased, Dr. and Mrs. Richmond.

"I think it is splendid," said she, "this——"

She paused for the word, and her husband, with a quizzical smile, supplied it:

"Rehabilitation."

"Oh, Corrie, not that! What a word to use!"

"It is not my word, my dear."

"Then whose?"

"Why, just Southfleet's, any collection of humanity. A man can't be allowed to clean himself up all on his own. The community must have a hand in it."

"But——"

"We are all barbered and shaved by the public, and unless you submit to the process you are that unsocial person, a prophet or a poet, or a something or other that seems superior."

"But aren't there unusual people?"

"Of course. But they must not rub it in, Lucy. The populace must be allowed the privilege of appearing to discover them."

"Then you think Southfleet——?"

"Oh, in time. They may get used to the idea that Gurney is a little unusual."

There were yet others who appeared to derive satisfaction from the surprise with which Gurney had provided Southfleet. For three successive days old Rawlins took a puckish pleasure in flaunting the news in the faces of such anti-Gurney residents as passed the turnstile. Offensive old man! Mr. Rawlins did not stoop to pat the little parson on the back. Old Rawlins had spent much of his life at sea, and was a mystical realist, and a good judge of men. Old Rawlins did not present Mr. Gurney with a halo, but believing in a rough and ready God as he did, he believed that Mr. Gurney was in God's confidence and good favour.

Mrs. Polly Cotgrove was another of his supporters. Surely, a landlady should know her lodger, and when tepid praise was

handed out, Mrs. Polly felt like emptying a cup of scalding tea into the languid and complacent lap.

"Never thought he had it in him? Well I'm blessed! And who are you to be so hoity-toity about a real Christian gentleman? Some of you people make me sick."

And using Mr. Rawlins's language Mrs. Polly might have added: "To hell with your opinions, anyway. What bloody right have you to be smug and superior about Mr. Gurney. Cor, go and wash your silly mouth out."

XXVIII

IT was characteristic of John Gurney that when he heard it rumoured that the Division was to be engaged in a major military operation he asked to have his leave postponed until the bloody business was over. And a bloody business it was to be—this Battle of Loos—in that black and desolate country where men hung dying and dead on barbed-wire, and the prize was no more than a few acres of derelict soil. Gurney went into that battle with a cheerful countenance, six packets of cigarettes and a dozen bars of chocolate, and two water-bottles slung about him, and he came out of it unscathed in the flesh, but sick and torn in spirit, unshaven, dirty, and red about the eyes.

For, incidentally, he had been dreadfully frightened. This had been no mere exciting incident, but hour upon hour of noise, peril, torture, blood, agony and death. He had heard men screaming, and the horrible screaming of shells, and the infernal hiss of machine-gun bullets. He had seen. He had found himself in a shell-hole, shaking, cold, with a belly that had dropped into profundities of flaccid fear. He had not wanted to get out of that shell-hole. He had been sick in it. Then, he had got on his knees within the smell of his own vomit, and prayed: "Oh,

God, give me strength!" He had emerged from that hole in the ground, pasty-faced and haggard, but with a scared courage in his eyes.

Compassion. That had saved him, and somehow made him forget the squirmings of his own mortal flesh. These poor dead, these wounded! Gurney plodded over the suffering soil, kneeling by wounded men, applying first-field dressings, giving drinks, lighting cigarettes, comforting those who were past hope. He helped to lift men on to stretchers and to carry them. He chanced upon the bearers of his own Field Ambulance in the desolation north of Hulluch, with a very unsmart Captain Smart salving the human debris. He joined them.

Smart, who found relief in anger when he was scared, shouted at Gurney.

"What the hell are you doing here, padre?"

"Taking my share of hell," said Gurney, and they grinned at each other, and were glad of each other in a world where a smile could be a challenge and a consolation.

Other men might have asked Gurney the same question, for he got so far forward that he found himself with the company of a famous regiment that was waiting to attack. The men were lying down, and a very grim young officer hailed Gurney.

"What the devil are you doing here, padre?"

Again, Gurney's reply was apt. "Having lunch with the devil."

"Well, get down, get down. It's a hell of a short spoon you have, standing up there to be potted."

Gurney lay down between two white-faced privates who grinned at him and over him.

"Fancy meeting you here, sir!"

"Why not?" said Gurney, "I ought to share what you have to bear, oughtn't I?"

Returning from that fracas, and helping along a wounded man whose arm had been shattered, Gurney found himself confronted by no less a person than the Brigadier. They were known

to each other. The Brigadier was looking fierce, for things were not going according to plan, and he had come up to sort out the situation.

"Hullo, Gurney. On the job?"

"Yes, sir."

"So I see. And glad to see it."

The fierce man and his brigade major went on.

"Funny little fellow—that."

"Funny? A damned good sort of funniness, Knowles. Now, where the devil is Haggard? They must have got badly hung up."

But it was a sad and sober body of men which gathered once again in a back area to rest and re-fit and be reinforced. Gaps had to be filled, and they were many. The Field Ambulance had had its losses. An advanced dressing-station had been hit and Captain Ryder killed with several of the men. Poor Ryder, every day he had written a letter home, and all his thoughts had gone to that Dorsetshire town where he had left a wife and three children. There was no joking in the mess, and Gurney, who had buried Ryder and the others, had done nothing else but bury men. It was a sad and sorrowful business. Moreover, there was not a private in the Division who did not realize, even if he kept it secret, that the Battle of Loos had been a bloody mess, a most depressing smack in the face. The British Army had been given its blood-bath. It had many things to learn with sweat and tears, anguish and curses, and those who led it had the most to learn.

When Major Morgan brought the news to John Gurney that he was to be recommended for a Bar to his Cross, Gurney felt no thrill.

"How—how superfluous, sir. I really would rather not have it."

"Why refuse what the gods give?"

"What have I done? And I nearly failed, you know."

"How?"

"I was most dreadfully and disgracefully frightened, and I hid in a shell-hole and was sick."

Major Morgan smiled, but it was a rather twisted smile. He had lost many friends, and an illusion.

"But you got out of it."

"By the grace of God, I did."

"We all hide in shell-holes—sometimes, Gurney, both in body and soul."

He produced a little piece of yellow paper.

"Your leave ticket, old man. You won't object to that?"

Gurney's eyes lit up. "No, sir. No complaints, no objections."

Gurney walked on to the leave-boat on a sunny October day. It was a happy boat, for here were men who were going home, though their sojourn would be so short and the return journey full of pangs. Gurney had no home to go to, but he had a ribbon on his tunic and some pride and thankfulness in his heart. He had endured; he had passed through his ordeal, and though he had surrendered to fear, he had overcome that fear. Was he proud of his piece of ribbon? He was, for in those early days the Military Cross had not become a ration, to be handed out to all and sundry, and pinned on the breasts of commanding officers' pets.

The crossing was uneventful, and Gurney found himself at Victoria Station, moving with the brown crowd towards a crowd of expectant faces. There would be no face there for him. He did not ask for it. He was liking the secrecy of his return, the surprising of a particular face. He was both afraid and dreaming. Would she look at him as her picture had looked at him, day by day, and through all those dreadful days? He had her picture in his pocket.

Gurney was unlucky in his taxi-driver, a sodden, hard-eyed boor. Fenchurch Street Station! Who the hell ever wanted to go to Fenchurch Street Station? The man drove like the boor that he was. Gurney gave sixpence as a tip, and the fellow held it in a contemptuous palm.

"I'll buy a gold 'alo with this."

Gurney had learnt to be apt with men. "I shouldn't try to, my friend. Why not a few new manners?"

"Gur, feelin' a bit cocky, aren't yer, with that bloody bit of ribbon?"

"I didn't buy it," said Gurney.

But somehow this snarling fellow's nastiness had stimulated him. It was different out there, and as he climbed the station steps, he smiled to himself and thought of Mr. Slade and certain of Mr. Slade's benign asperities. "Why should the common man be always expected to be other than common." "Let's get rid of some of the humbug, John. Your common man does not covet a gold halo. More often he covets his neighbour's bank-balance."

Gurney entered his first-class carriage. There were three other men in it, commercial gentlemen, all of them unknown to Gurney. They eyed him a little curiously, and with a suggestion of patronage. One of them attempted conversation.

"Been out in France?"

"Yes," said Gurney.

"I suppose you didn't see anything of that last show?"

Parsons wouldn't, of course!

"Oh, just a little."

"A beastly bungle, I take it."

Gurney, having seen dead men, did not feel gentle towards this live one.

"Beastly, sir, yes. Those who never bungle and are not in the bungling had better be silent."

And there was silence.

The strange thing about it all was that at Southfleet Station and in Southfleet High Street no one appeared to notice Gurney and his ribbon. No sudden and welcoming smiles, no surprised and outstretched hands! No, "Why, if it isn't you, sir!" Gurney was just another creature in khaki, one of the brown multitude, and after a year of war enthusiasm was ceasing to be

dramatic. Stranger still, a certain dumb hostility was developing against the man in khaki. Maybe he advertised the war too much with those who wished to forget it; he challenged the older men at home who were feeling young and potent, now that youth was absent. He was billeted upon people who did not always welcome the soldier-stranger. Some of them were earning unpleasant reputations for pilfering and what not, and, as Mr. Sawkins put it: "The scum is in the army." Anyhow, it was not till Gurney turned into Mr. Slade's shop that any face brightened with happy recognition.

"Why, God in heaven, it's John!"

"John it is, sir."

"Why the blazes didn't you tell us you were coming?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir. Maybe I wanted to play Rip van Winkle."

Mr. Slade had his hands on Gurney's shoulders, and he turned him round to the light.

"Ah, there we are! Doesn't it look new and nice. I'm going to strut around with you, my friend, and get reflected glory."

Gurney smiled into Mr. Slade's eyes. As yet, Southfleet had given him no glory.

"Staying with us, of course, John."

"I can't inflict myself——"

"Oh, fudge and nonsense, and you know it. No, I'm not going to ring up Sea View. You go and create your own sensation."

And with affectionate playfulness Mr. Slade pushed Gurney out of the shop.

Mr. Gurney continued down the High Street, with the sea a'glitter before him, and the devout terror of the lover in his heart. He was so absorbed in the tremendous issue that he saw nobody, and ignored the few who remembered. He turned to pass along Caroline Terrace, and saw the oaks in the gardens gathering a tinge of gold, and the polished, glabrous gleam of the hollies. The little gardens were still flowering, for, as yet, there had been

no frost. Gurney saw the sunlight making a track across the sea, and spreading in a sheet across the cliffs and the stretch of turf. He did not see Mr. Sawkins on his balcony, but Mr. Sawkins saw him and scowled. So, John Gurney came to the cliffs, and feeling strangely strung up and confronting some immemorial mystery, he sat down on a seat by the flagstaff and was conscious of inward transformation. What had happened to him? How and why had he changed? For changed he had. What of the multitude of men? For years he had felt it to be his lot to dwell in the midst of this multitude and labour for it. And now? The multitude was just an anonymous mass, and the more multitudinous it was the more drab and hopeless was the issue. It would absorb all the follies and vices of the crowd. How could it be leavened? Could it be leavened? Gurney smiled at the sea. Was he becoming a determinist? Did he believe that only the singular souls mattered, the exquisite few, Her? But, surely this was rank heresy?

Gurney shook himself up. He squared his shoulders, adjusted his haversack, gripped his little cane and walked across the grass towards the houses. There stood his temple of the unknown, a place of primordial mystery. How would she meet him? That, to Gurney, was all that mattered for the moment.

He came to the gate and paused. The green veranda was empty, the chairs put away, for these October evenings could be chilly. A little shiver ran down Gurney's spine. He opened the gate, closed it carefully, like a man who was shirking some meeting and playing for time. He walked up the path trying to look and feel casual. Perhaps she was not in? He could not know that she had seen him from her bedroom window, and that she was watching him with secret tenderness. He could not see her go quickly to her mirror, and pat her hair and appraise herself, as women do.

Gurney rang the bell. A voice from the landing halted the maid who had come out to answer it.

"I'll go, Nellie. It is a friend."

Gurney had faced about and had his back to the door as though

it might be easier to confront a crisis with your back turned. He did not hear footsteps, but he heard the door open, and he faced about.

"John!"

Was her deceit justified? No doubt it was. Gurney stood, head up, like a man looking at a precious picture that had been screened for him by time. How was the question to be answered? Was she——? Yes, it was the face he had carried about with him, and the reality was more lovely than the picture.

"My dear, why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Gurney did not colour up as she did. He was white, poignantly pale.

"Well, I——"

Her face seemed to come nearer, a melting, happy face. And then he had his arms round her. He kissed her, and the kiss came back to him.

Oh, strange confusion! Her eyes slanted downwards; her lashes drooped. She put forth a finger and touched the ribbon on his tunic.

"Now, I have seen it! I'm so proud, my dear."

XXIX

MR. SLADE took a day off.

"Now, John, for reflected glory."

But Gurney was not feeling wholly glorious. That is the worst of being a sensitive creature; some problematical gadfly is for ever dancing into the sun-ray and threatening to sting you. Gurney had gone to bed in a state of wonder and of exaltation, and had wakened in the middle of the night with a ghostly voice importuning him. It told him that his future would be that of a curate whose stipend might be about three pounds a week, and that Mrs. Hallard was a wealthy young woman. It was not

what people might say that troubled Gurney. He was beginning to know that people said unpleasant things about you, whatever you did, so—all public gossip was superfluous. Gurney's ghost-voice and gadfly were created by his own foolish and hyper-sensitive conscience. If he asked Her to marry him, Southfleet might say that he was after her money. Southfleet might go to Jericho; it was her faith in his sincerity that mattered.

"I ought to call on Mr. Jones."

"Egbert can wait," said Mr. Slade. "Let's walk on the pier."

Now, a walk on the pier was what John Gurney desired. Here was his father-confessor, a sage whose sagacity would be greatly concerned in the issue. Moreover, in the old tradition a father's consent was considered helpful.

"Just what I would like, sir. To get away from crowds."

"Rather a crowded life over there, John."

"Yes, one is hardly ever alone."

But if Gurney thought he was going to elude publicity, he was mistaken. It was as though Mr. Slade had charmed Southfleet into the highways, and that John Gurney's unheralded return of yesterday had been too previous. They met Miss Godbold, and the Misses Plimsoll taking out a very fat spaniel for exercise, and John Gurney saluted the ladies. They did not appear to be particularly pleased to see him, for the prejudices of spinsters can be as leathery as their persons. Then they ran into Mr. Golightly, and that was a different matter. Mr. Golightly lifted a perfect hat and his smile was glossy and welcoming. He shook John Gurney heartily by the hand.

"Well, this is a most pleasant surprise. Congratulations, Mr. Gurney, congratulations."

He gazed at the ribbon on John Gurney's tunic. "An honour that we all appreciate, sir. Really, I think the town should have given you a public welcome."

Gurney looked uncomfortable, and Mr. Slade twinkled.

"Our hero arrived like a thief in the night."

"Modesty, sir. I think we ought to give a dinner, Slade. Yes, most certainly a dinner."

Gurney walked along Caroline Terrace between his two civic supporters, and past Mr. Sawkins's hotel, and Mr. Sawkins happened to emerge to do the day's catering.

"'Morning, Sawkins," sang Mr. Slade.

Mr. Sawkins grunted. He had no graces, and Mr. Slade chuckled.

This public progress continued. People crossed the road to welcome and congratulate John Gurney, but at last they reached the pier entrance. Old Rawlins was on duty, and old Rawlins smote his thigh, and pushed his head and shoulders through the window of the ticket-office rather like a cuckoo from a cuckoo-clock.

"Lord love a duck, sir, it does me good to see you! Ribbon and all."

"I'm very glad to be here, Rawlins."

"Is it for good, sir?"

"No, I'm afraid not," and suddenly John Gurney looked thoughtful. He would have to go back. But of course. And yet the going back seemed different.

"Keeping well, Rawlins?"

"Prime, sir."

"If you see Mrs. Cotgrove tell her I shall be along to see her."

"I will, sir. Everybody will be pleased to see you."

They escaped, and saw the long timber trackway before them, empty at this early hour, and with the closing of the season A pleasant breeze was blowing and John Gurney took off his cap He needed a hair-cut, and remembered it. He ought to have thought of it before meeting Her.

Mr. Slade also removed his hat, and the sunlight caressed his white head.

"Not a bad place this, John."

"No You can walk without listening."

"To an old fellow's patter."

"Oh, no, sir. Shells. There is a strange frontier out there, the line where you begin to listen On one side you feel secure, on the other——"

"Yes, I can imagine it."

"To put it vulgarly, you feel tight in the ears and the tummy."

Mr. Slade looked at him with wise affection. John Gurney spoke with more sureness. He had been a man among men.

"Well, you needn't listen here, John."

Gurney pursed his lips together and was silent for some seconds. "Will you do the listening?"

"As long as you like."

"I'm worried. I want to talk to you about it. I hope you will understand."

"Go ahead, John."

Gurney looked at the sea. "I—I—love your daughter."

"Well, why not? She's a rather lovable——"

"Much too good for me, sir. And yet, strange though it may sound—I think——"

"She returns it, John."

"I hardly dare to——"

Mr. Slade was smiling. "Well, what's the—obstruction?"

"I'm just a poor curate. I may be nothing more than that."

"There's much in being that. So, my lad, you are frightened of Rose's money?"

"Yes, just that. It would be terrible to feel——"

Mr. Slade took Gurney's arm. "What sort of man do you think you are, John, or what sort of man do *we* think you are? I'll go—sponsor."

"Then you wouldn't think me capable——?"

"Oh, John, what a dear ass you are! Here's a question for you. Has Rose kissed you?"

John Gurney blushed and looked embarrassed. "Yes, she has, out of her great—kindness."

"Kindness! Go along with you, John. My daughter is no fool. There is no commerce in such kisses."

"Thank you. But would you—object?"

"To what?"

"My asking—for marriage? Of course she might refuse me. I am quite prepared for that."

Mr. Slade pressed John Gurney's arm. "Well, ask her. You'll have my blessing."

Gurney returned the pressure of Mr. Slade's arm. "Thank you. You have always been such a good friend to me. Then, I'm thinking of the boy too—but perhaps that is presumption. I am very fond of George."

"I shouldn't say that he actively dislikes you, John. After all, you would be a better father than the man who begot him."

It was at lunch that Gurney gathered sufficient confidence to confess that he would welcome a second walk on the pier. Would She care to come with him? With an air of self-possessed and happy serenity she said yes. And could it be after tea?

"I must really go and see Mr. Jones this afternoon."

"We can have an early tea, John."

"Thank you. I don't want to upset——"

"Shall we say four o'clock."

John Gurney, having smoked a pipe with Mr. Slade, took his cap and cane and set forth to see his vicar. He found Mr. Jones in the conservatory, and the meeting between them was heartier than Emily would have liked. Mr. Jones's handshake was less flabby than of yore. Things were going well with him; he had been offered the living of Hope St. Edwards, the richest living in the diocese, and the prize would come to him on the death of the present incumbent, who was eighty-three and not long for this world. Moreover, Mr. Jones was to become a Canon.

"Well, my dear Gurney, congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Jones could not shed all of his patronage, but he shed so much of it that his tone was paternal.

"We have all been quite excited about your honour. You have it there, I see. Quite apposite—the Cross. The Church Militant, Gurney, the Church Militant."

This heavy playfulness concealed no irony. Mr. Jones had ceased from feeling jealous of John Gurney. Canon Jones of Hope St. Edwards need not be jealous of anybody, and chry-

santhemums would flourish there as successfully as at Southfleet.

"You must stay to tea, Gurney, and tell us all about it."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I am booked for tea to-day. May I make it to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, then, Gurney. Where are you staying?"

"With Mr. Slade."

"Ah, James Slade. He is quite a Southfleet worthy. We talk gardens together. Just look at my dear mums, Gurney. Flowers make one forget the war."

John Gurney, having admired Mr. Jones's chrysanthemums, hurried down into the Old Town to pay his respects to Mrs. Cotgrove. It so happened that a number of the local watermen were getting their boats up for the winter. They were all elderly men, for the young men were in the Navy or on minesweepers, and Gurney, stopping to shake hands with old Ted Myall, found the other men clustering round. Nor were John Gurney's ribbon and his new reputation the only lures; he was more popular than he knew with these men of the sea.

"Glad to see you back, sir."

"Jerry didn't see—that, sir, did he!"

The joke drew laughter, in which Gurney joined. It had become a habit with him to carry cigarettes, and he produced a packet and passed them round.

"How's everybody? How's your wife, Ted?"

"Not too bad, sir."

"Remember Alf, sir?"

"Of course I do."

"Been torpedoed twice."

"Has he? I hope——"

"He's on his third ship."

"That's the stuff," said Gurney. "Sorry I can't stay. I'm seeing Mrs. Cotgrove."

The men remained grouped together, smoking in silence, and watching him cross the road.

"Good little bloke, that."

"No nonsense about 'im."

Said Ted Myall with bearded gravity: "Speaking for myself I'd say—Gurney's the sort of parson who would suit this 'ere town."

"Same with me, brother. I've never seen old Egbert in a boat."

"Nor Emily."

"Cor—Emily! Flat fish!"

Plain men are apt to be crude in their summing up of social values.

The day continued kind, kinder than some of the remarks passed by certain of Southfleet's residents. But who cared? What mattered Mr. Sawkins's snarls, or Mrs. Jones's cynicism.

"So, that's what he's after!

"Her money!"

The sun was a great gold piece in a cloudless sky Old Sol must be a benign and tolerant fellow, shining alike upon the lovely and the ugly, upon the mean and peevish, and the warm of heart. John Gurney might be conscious of the ribbon on his tunic, but he was more conscious of the decoration her nearness assigned to him. He—was going forth with her, to utter those memorable words. It was like going up the line with a little tight knot in your tummy. No, but hardly that Frightened he might be, but her face should have provoked no fear.

Old Rawlins greeted them. Well, God bless 'em both! Was there anything in this public parade? Old Rawlins hoped so. Old Rawlins had moments when he could be exultantly sentimental.

The timber trackway lay sunlit before them.

Said she: "Tell me how it happened."

John Gurney gave her one quick look. "Oh, well, it just happened."

"And how?"

"An aid-post was hit by a shell, and I happened to be near."

She was smiling. "And you—happened—to rescue the men."

"Well, yes. I managed to get in. Just impulse, you know."

It was her turn to glance at him. "Nothing more than impulse, John?"

"Well, perhaps——"

"Something rather strong behind the impulse. Impulse might have made you run away."

"Of course, it might."

"You must never run away, John."

Now, just what did she mean by that? Was there some exquisite implication in those very simple words? John Gurney was silent. And then they came to the pier-head, and saw the steps descending to the lower stage where the green-black water played to and fro under your feet.

"Let's go down, John. I like to watch the water."

And suddenly she took his arm. Reflected sunlight played on the white and black timber, and the sea made a gentle splashing as it swayed through the piles. The place was deserted. They stood together in one of the bays and looked out across the sea. John Gurney still held her arm, and she showed no desire to free herself; in fact she seemed to press a little closer to him.

Now or never! What had she meant by saying that he must never run away? As if he could ever run away from her! But there was this dreadful war, and the going back.

"Rose."

"Yes, John?"

"There is something I want to say."

"Well, say it, darling."

Darling! John Gurney felt that the sea was going up and down, and the pier with it.

"You can't know——?"

"What can't I know?"

What a lot of prompting he needed!

"How much I love you."

She turned her head slowly and looked at him.

"My dear, why are you so frightened? Men who do such brave things——"

"I wasn't half so frightened when——"

"What a horrid thing to say!"

"Oh, Rose, I don't mean—— I mean I'm so frightened—because—it means—so terribly much to me."

"Almost you are running away, John."

She was smiling, and her eyes—— John Gurney looked into them. His head went up. He was standing on parade—a man whom other men looked to.

"Rose, will you marry me?"

"Yes, John, I will."

Old Rawlins saw them come back, for old Rawlins was doing some privileged snooping through a hole he had bored in the side wall of the ticket office. No one was near them, and the glow of the sunset lit up their two figures. They were holding hands.

Old Rawlins smacked his thigh.

"Coo, he's been and gone and done it! Lord love a duck, that'll be somethink for the old hens to cackle about. Well, God bless 'em both!"

XXX

CACKLE there was, but unexpectedly it was more kind than old Rawlins would have thought possible

Not that the parties concerned advertised the engagement. The announcement was made to the privileged few. John Gurney and Mrs. Hallard were seen together in public, even walking arm in arm, and very much absorbed in each other. The Rev Egbert Jones gave them his blessing; Mr. Golightly gave them a dinner, not at the Regent Hotel, but in his own very comfortable dining-room. There was champagne. and Mr. Golightly made a short, suave speech, and proposed the health and happiness of John Gurney and Mr. Slade's daughter.

Mrs. Richmond kissed her, and while doing so, thought of Charles in Gallipoli, a Charles in whom romantic memories still lingered. Poor Charles! But there were other charming women in the world, and Charles should marry a girl younger than himself.

The news was broken to George. They went up to London together, and took the boy out to lunch. John Gurney was very shy of the occasion but when George asked for a particular favour, Gurney's fears were lessened.

"Will you come back to the school with me?"

"Why, yes, if you want me to, George."

"We break up at four."

John Gurney looked a little puzzled. George was eating his second helping of raspberry jam-tart.

Said his mother: "You have the afternoon off."

"Yes, mater, I know."

"Well, dear?"

George was looking at Gurney's ribbon. "The chaps all come out at four. I'd like to walk round the playground with Mr. Gurney."

John and Rose looked at each other and smiled.

"All right, George; we'll do it."

So, John Gurney was a hero to his second wife's boy!

Mrs. Hallard had some shopping to do; also, she was not unaware of the prejudices attached to public school playgrounds. Fathers might perambulate them, mothers—no, save on very exceptional occasions. So, John Gurney and George set off together, and George wanted to be told just how his future father had won his decoration. Gurney, who was bothered by the immediate problem, gave a very modest account of his adventure, and as he was doing so his inspiration came to him. Why not treat the boy as man and comrade, with complete candour and happy confidence.

"George, I've got a secret, but I am going to tell it to you."

"Are you, sir?"

"Can you keep it?"

"Ra—ther."

"Well, they are giving me what is called a Bar to my Military Cross."

"That means—you did something else?"

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"Where was it?"

"At the battle of Loos."

"Were you there, sir, too?"

"Very much so, George. It was a very terrible battle."

"Why don't you want people to know?"

"Well, I blush rather easily."

"So do I, sir."

They had reached the school gate and the hour was a quarter to four, and John Gurney, after looking at his wrist-watch, laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Let's walk round the playground, shall we?"

"Yes, let's."

There was a brief silence. Then John Gurney spoke. "Do you love your mother very much, George?"

"Yes, I do."

"Of course you do. She's a very wonderful person. And I love her too. Do you mind?"

The eyes were very serious in the freckled face.

"No, sir. Why?"

"Because she is going to belong to both of us. I'm going to be your father."

John Gurney willed himself to look down steadily into the boy's face. Would he see any shadow there, a secret and stealthy jealousy, some unpleasant Freudian reaction? He did not; George's blue eyes smiled at him.

"Well, won't that be fun, Mr. Gurney?"

John Gurney pinched George's cheek. "More than fun. I've got a new responsibility. You, George. And you had better stop calling me sir."

"What shall I call you then?"

"Why, just—father. What else?"

"All right, father."

George had his eyes on the school steps and the two elephantine pillars of granite round and between which the school would pour forth. It was now two minutes to four, and George and John Gurney were opposite the "Gym". A little avenue of plane trees lay before them, their mottled trunks sustaining the pale, autumnal foliage. George steered his new father under the trees towards the tiers of steps, and the sudden *va et vient* of emergent youth. George's freckled face had a cocky sheen. He wanted to show young Barter and one or two others that he had a friend who had been to the war and held a decoration for valour.

George posed John Gurney close to the field railings and facing the steps and the sudden torrent that poured down them. Gurney might be feeling a little conscious of all this publicity, and that he was George's exhibit, but he was feeling happy with George. Anyhow, his new son was not ashamed of his new father. "I should say not, sir!" The school stared. Young Hallard with an officer in khaki, an officer with a ribbon on his tunic. George was watching for his particular enemy. He saw, he grinned, he challenged.

"Hullo, young Barter!"

"Hullo, yourself."

"This is my pater. He's been in the battle of Loos."

Young Barter was a sallow, arrogant child with a fat and turgid face.

"Glad to meet you, sir."

John Gurney held out a hand.

"I'm glad too."

"What's that, the Military Cross, sir?"

"Yes."

"And he's just won a Bar to it," said George.

Gurney cuffed him gently. "What was the promise, my lad?"

"Sorry, pater. I forgot."

But George's particular triumph was yet to come. Down the

steps strolled Bushell, the captain of the Rugger team, tasselled velvet cap on head, a rugger ball in the crook of his arm. Bushell was a tall, dark, comely lad, clean-cut as to looks and manners. He was taking out some of the team for practice between the goal posts. George gazed at the great man, and the great man glanced at John Gurney. He saw the ribbon, and a ribbon had significance for Bill Bushell.

"Afternoon, sir."

John Gurney smiled at this comely lad. "A little practice?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid my game is cricket."

George was goggling on his toes. "This—is—my pater, sir. Mr. Bushell, our Rugger captain."

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Hallard."

They shook hands, and John Gurney did not enter into explanations, but George was not to be suppressed.

"Excuse me, sir, his name is Gurney, Captain Gurney, M.C. with Bar."

The tall boy looked puzzled, then amused.

"Oh, I see. Sorry, sir."

John Gurney took George by the collar. "This young man can't keep a secret, Bushell. I think I had better hand him over to you."

George wriggled. "I forgot again. You see, Mr. Gurney's going to be my second pater."

John Gurney and Bill Bushell looked into each other's eyes and laughed.

Three days to go, two days to go.

How very swiftly this wonderful leave had passed!

Things seemed different to John Gurney. The shameful truth was that he did not welcome going back. Not that he would funk it, but life had a new perspective. Out there he had been a lone little fellow sanctified to his job; now he had Her and George. He was responsible for other things than wounded or worried men. Other thoughts and fears would clutch him in

dangerous places. He must live—not die. He had not thought so much about death before, or mutilation, but now they were horrors to be faced and, if God willed it, flouted.

She had said to him: "I will marry you, John, before you go back, if you wish it. I suppose it can be——"

But John Gurney had found himself dominated by a strange superstition. Yet, was it superstition? He could remember a hard-bitten colonel saying: "I'm always sorry when one of my lads gets married while on leave. So often he comes back and gets himself killed." Yes, that was true. Fate seemed to pick out a man who had reasons for being careful.

On that last night they sat on the sofa before the fire, with the lights turned low, and the wind making a moaning in the chimney. Mr. Slade had letters to write, but no letters were written; he was reconsidering some alterations in his will. Mr. Slade was a warm man, and he had a prospective son to remember. John Gurney had one arm round her shoulders, the other held one of her hands. As a lover he was still subject to moments of shyness, and though he did not know it she loved this shyness. A woman does not ask to be taken for granted, and Rose's first husband had been that sort of man.

John Gurney was thinking of those first golden days. Now, the weather had broken, and that fatal boat would not swim through halcyon seas. Probably he would be seasick. And he did wish that the wind would not make that melancholy noise in the chimney.

His silence challenged her. She looked up at his dim and serious face. What was he thinking, or feeling?

"You're not worrying, John?"

"No. Only—feeling homesick—in prospect. There is a difference, you know."

"You will take care of yourself."

"I'll try to. I have every reason to try to."

She turned her eyes to the fire. "Am I making things more difficult for you, dear?"

He hesitated, and his hesitation was revealing.

"Well, in a way——"

"I'm so sorry. Perhaps—if——"

But suddenly John Gurney was man. He took her face between his hands and looked into her eyes.

"Yes, I am afraid, but it is a—splendid fear. What might I lose? The most lovely thing in all the world. But that shall not make me a coward. I shall want you to be proud of me. I shall feel you near me. Whatever happens, you have given me the greatest thing in all the world."

She put up her lips and kissed him.

"I'll try to be brave too, my dearest man. Proud I am, and proud I will be. Nothing can take that from us."

"Nothing," said he.

XXXI

SHE did not see him off. This lingering upon station platforms could be too lamentable.

"I will come and meet you, John, but not say good-bye."

He liked to think of her as he remembered her on that dim, autumnal morning, standing at the gate of Sea View, with the collar of her fur coat turned up, and her hair shaming the drab morning. She could smile so long as his face was turned to her. So could John Gurney, though there was a plaintive whimpering in him like the woe of a young child. He had never felt like this before. How young one could be!

He did not enjoy that return journey. Somehow he shrank from the crowds and the noise, those dumb faces with poignant eyes, the rowdy and forcefully cheerful lads who happened to be in his carriage. Leave had been a hell of a binge, all alcohol and sex, and if they looked with ironical and faint hostility at Gurney, his smile and his ribbon were somewhat reassuring.

Poor lads, they had wanted to live, crush the last juice out of the grape, before being bundled back into that bloody business. John Gurney had become more tender to life's frailties.

"I'm afraid we're shocking you, padre."

"No, gentlemen. I haven't lived in back areas."

"I should say not—with that!"

"Going back isn't always too easy. I know that—personally."

He smiled upon them, and after this short exchange their stories grew less lurid.

It was a rough crossing, and Gurney was sick on the boat. Cold and yellow, he saw Calais grey and dreary against a drizzling sky. How different had been that other crossing! A bored R.T.O. was not helpful. The Nth Division? Oh, out of the line somewhere and in rest.

"You had better try Hazebrouck, padre."

John Gurney tried Hazebrouck, but the Division was not in that area. He passed the night in a chilly little hotel, feeling very homesick, and not at all a hero.

It took him another day to find his friends. They were in the Amiens area behind the Somme, new ground, rolling chalkland with little villages tucked away beside some stream in the midst of towering poplars. It was growing dark when Gurney left the lorry that had given him a lift, and walked into his particular village. He was feeling cold and hungry and depressed.

A figure in khaki emerged from an estaminet, and Gurney hailed it.

"Can you tell me where the ambulance is?"

"Why, it's you, sir!"

"What, Smith!"

"Yessir. Glad to see you back, sir."

Gurney did not say that he was glad to be back, but he was glad of Smith.

"Everybody well?"

"Champion, sir. Just round the corner here. Jolly good farm."

They passed through a gateway into the usual courtyard with

its muck-pit. There was a moist dim smell. John Gurney saw a lighted window, like a kindly eye.

"That's the Officers' Mess window, sir."

"Good, Smith."

"Had any tea, sir?"

"No."

"I'll see to that."

John Gurney groped his way down a dark passage, and as he did so he could hear familiar voices coming from that farmhouse room, Griggs's bass, Smart's tenor, the colonel's dry creak. A sudden warmth went through him. Thank God for brother-men, the human stuff that you knew, even in its grossness and its horseplay. This French farmhouse could be home from home. Gurney put his hand to the handle and opened the door, and he had a momentary glimpse of the interior before faces were turned to him. Tea was still on the table, though the cloth had been pushed back. The colonel, Griggs, Smart and a new officer were playing Bridge. Pipes hung out of mouths, and the air was full of tobacco smoke. Hornblower had his feet up on the stove and was reading a novel. Then those faces lifted or turned, and John Gurney stood for his portrait in the frame of the doorway.

There were shouts, sudden exuberance.

"Why, it's the old padre!"

"Hullo, you old scoundrel!"

"Hooroosh! Come in and be kissed."

Cards were planked face-down on the table. Griggs got up, took three strides and, picking the padre up, carried him round the room like an infant. His feet nearly brushed Captain Hornblower's face. The mess's sardonic wag sniffed appraisingly.

"You've been in the muck-pit, padre."

"No, he hasn't."

"He's got some of it on his boots."

Griggs held Gurney's feet to the light, and to the colonel.

"Inspect the infant, sir."

"All in order."

"Ordure," said Smart.

John Gurney smiled up at Griggs. "Put me down, uncle. I'll be a good boy. I'll change my boots."

Griggs put him down, and John Gurney solemnly saluted the colonel.

"Excuse these children, sir."

"Had a good leave, padre?"

"Very."

Griggs was regarding him with affectionate shyness. "Got married?"

"Not quite, but——"

"Shut up, Griggy, you're making the poor man blush."

Thank God for this warm, human stuff! John Gurney found that a bedroom had been kept for him, a little, austere, white-washed cell, with a red coverlet on the bed, and a picture of the Sacred Heart above it. How wise were the Catholics! The little, clever people might call it Mumbo-Jumbo, but these shepherds of souls chose the human heart for their symbol. The Roman padre in the Division had become a particular friend of Gurney's, and like two travellers on the same road, who differed in their costume, they could march as comrades in the same essential faith. John Gurney kneeled down at his bed and gave thanks for many things, Her, man in his simplicities, this corner in a troubled world where he was somebody to other men, a comrade, and perhaps a father confessor.

He was a tired man, though not feeling tired, and when they sat down to dinner, the colonel, in his dry, kind way, pushed his whisky bottle towards John Gurney.

"Have a drink, padre."

"Thank you, sir. I think I will."

Griggs made a face at him. "That means one with me, too."

So, Gurney drank two whiskies, and did not feel that he had sinned. Not at all so; his tummy warmed to the stuff and was glad. Pipes were lit, and the cards produced. John Gurney took a hand; he had been taught the game, and his education was

gaining breadth. He partnered the colonel, and won six francs. How disgraceful! Padre Bluett had refused to drink whisky or to touch cards, and to these other men he had been a little, windy prig.

Gurney lay awake for an hour or more, listening to the wind in the poplars. It made him think of the wind in the chimneys of Sea View, but somehow it was less sad. He had been afraid then, but he was less fearful now, a man among men, men who trusted him. Yes, that was the most precious thing of all, your faith and the faith of your fellows. Without it no nimble cunning, no erudition would avail you. John Gurney had placed Her picture on the top of a chest of drawers, and in the darkness he could feel it there. He fell asleep, weary yet comforted.

Was he more afraid than in the old days? He was, and yet there was a kind of poignant joy in mastering fear, and even in going to meet it. It was like setting out to face an icy but stimulating wind, and to button your courage over your heart and smile, if a little bleakly, in the face of the morning.

His comrades and friends saw no change in Padre Gurney. He was still the Front Line Priest, known here, there, everywhere, and welcomed in dim and dangerous dug-outs. He could smile; he was master of his soul; he could speak gentle and comforting words to men who were troubled. His Faith shone in action. He was the exemplar, the human symbol of the God he served, and many men came to believe in John Gurney and his God.

Tales came to be told about him, some completely true, others a little highly-coloured. There was one member of the Ambulance Mess whom Gurney had never quite won as a friend, Hornblower, the tall and elegant, grey and cool of eye, man of the new age, sceptical and sardonic. To Hornblower religion was a Punch and Judy show, and John Gurney the showman, sincere no doubt, but an emotional little fellow with too much back to his head.

It happened that Captain Hornblower was up in charge of a particularly nasty advanced dressing-station, the cellars of a

ruined brewery. A most unpleasant road led to it, straight and shelterless, and shelled on most days with sedulous precision. Now, this dressing-station received a direct hit. Much rubble came rumbling down upon the cellar vaulting, but the only casualty was the mess teapot. Blast blew in the canvas of the cookhouse window, and the teapot was smashed upon the floor.

No grave tragedy, this! And yet it was so, especially to the superfine Hornblower. A Ford ambulance, going back to Headquarters with a couple of wounded gunners, carried a chit and an appeal.

"The infernal Boches have broken my teapot. Can you replace it? Otherwise everything is serene."

John Gurney, hearing of the calamity, took a seat in an ambulance and visited a neighbouring town. He managed to procure a teapot, a homely, brown thing. But that was not the end of the story. Tin hats had come in and, one sunny morning, John Gurney set out for a country walk, steel helmet on head, and carrying the precious teapot. Everything was quiet for the first part of the pilgrimage, but as Gurney neared the ruined village in which the brewery lived, the Germans began to shell the road. Those nasty crumps were coming nearer and nearer, and Gurney retreated into a ditch and squatted there, nursing the teapot. He did not like those shells, oh—not at all, and in the matter of high explosive familiarity did not breed contempt. Perpetual danger wore men down; the veteran might be one who was near to breaking-point.

Dirt was flung into the ditch, and John Gurney, feeling frightened, cursed those Germans.

"Damn you, mind the teapot!"

Actually he removed his steel helmet and held it over the piece of crockery.

The storm passed, and John Gurney got out of his ditch, and walked on towards those jagged fragments of brickwork that once had been a village. He was still sheltering the teapot with his steel helmet, and so, he came bare-headed to the steep steps that led down into the brewery cellars. A man was standing there,

smoking a cigarette and scribbling a message. It was Captain Hornblower himself.

"Hullo, padre, what the hell are you doing here? You don't mean to say you have walked up that bloody road?"

John Gurney smiled, though his face was white and shiny with sweat.

"I've brought you a teapot."

He uncovered the vessel. Captain Hornblower stared at it, and then lifted grey eyes to the man above him.

"You carried that—up under your tin hat?"

"The wretches were shelling the road, and I was afraid it might be hit by a splinter."

Hornblower spat the cigarette out of his mouth.

"Well, I'm damned!" and he added: "You are a peach of a padre."

Then, there was the episode of the boots. A particular battalion was detailed to raid the German trenches, and the adventure proved to be a bloody and rather disastrous affair. It was a sweet spring night, and wounded men came down by the score to a dressing-station in a deserted farmhouse. Doctors and orderlies were more than busy. Casualties piled up on them. Brown bodies lay stacked on stretchers round the courtyard and in the lane outside the farm. Men groaned; the aspen trees whispered. What pain and anguish was here! The Division's Great Man, arriving in a staff-car to explore the situation for himself, stopped at the dressing-station and got out. He looked in silence at all those stretchers. He saw a little figure moving from one to the other, bent and busy. His curiosity was challenged. He went nearer, flashed a torch.

The figure was John Gurney's.

"Hullo, padre—busy?"

"Taking off boots, sir."

"Ah—boots."

"I think it makes them more comfortable."

The Great Man turned his torch on Gurney's face. The General

was no sentimentalist, but his inward thought was: "Christ might have had a face like that."

Maybe it did occur to Padre Gurney that the reputation for a seemingly reckless devotion to duty might be the death of him. Success kills many more men than does failure. The failures can grub along in an obscure groove, but those whose skill makes them the slave of a craft may be sacrificed by those who crowd upon them for service. John Gurney saw so many of the sad and horrible things of war; he was for ever burying the dead, or listening to the woes of the overstrained living. It was he who had to appear calm and of a cheerful countenance, and preach the Cross and man's redemption, when he was feeling weary, and afraid, afraid of some lapse, some crack in his continual courage.

Life was beginning to wound him, life as it came to him in her dear letters. Would this bloody business never cease? Would he ever go home to her, not for those few and poignant days, but for good? There were times when he was afraid of his own increasing fearfulness, his shrinking—not only from the things he saw, but from a torturing sense of personal peril. He was not the man he had been. He was tired. Life was tantalizing him. Oh, for peace, and some tranquil place where your ears did not strain and your stomach contract, and your heart pound like the heart of some frightened animal!

He saw men come and he saw them go, under the earth or away to some hospital. If it were to happen to him, which would it be? Sometimes he would lie awake at night and shiver.

He confessed to his friend. "It is a horrible thing to say, but I seem to be more afraid."

Morgan looked at him affectionately. "Have a rest. I'll get you a special leave."

But John Gurney would not accept that offer. "No. I'd feel like running away. And going home would make it more difficult."

"We shall be out in rest next week."

"Oh, I shall get over it. One of one's windy patches."

Yet, the very next day, Gurney was assailed by what was for him a major tragedy. Morgan was killed while visiting a battalion in the line. The headquarters' mess was hit by a 5.9, and all its occupants were done to death.

Gurney was more shocked by this tragedy than by any other happening that he had experienced. It touched him personally and profoundly, in the loss of this big-hearted man who had fathered him in his first lonely days, and who had never shown jealousy. That is, perhaps, the rarest virtue in the world of men. Moreover, Morgan's sudden death provoked the personal dread that had become so acute in him. Gurney had seen his friend's body, and had suffered from sudden nausea and panic. Morgan to become—that, a poor, pulped, unrecognizable thing! What if it should happen to him. He could only utter a bitter and secret cry——

"Oh, God, give me strength to master my craven self!"

He wanted to be alone, away from men, to withdraw into some secret place like an animal that has been hunted, and get his breath and suffer his heart to calm down. Should he ask for leave, not home leave, but for a week in some French town where he might forget the war? Forget! How could he forget, or refrain from facing it? That was impossible.

It was.

He was not to be allowed such abstention. He was sent for by the Great Man, a personal and friendly interview.

"Gurney, this is a sad business."

"Terrible, sir. Morgan was my——"

"Yes. A great loss to us. But it is my wish, Gurney, and I think the wish of many others, that you should take Morgan's place. I have some right to choose my senior chaplains."

John Gurney held his breath. This was both an honour and a sentence. He was not to be suffered to escape.

"I—I—don't know what to say, sir."

"Well, say nothing, Gurney."

"But, sir, I don't know whether I am capable of taking Morgan's place."

"We think you are."

"It means that I shall have to leave the Ambulance, sir?"

"Yes, you will come to us. We may be a solemn crowd after your doctors."

"I did not mean that, sir."

"Well, it will be more comfortable for you in many ways. You have had some tough times, Gurney. You look a little tired. Take it easier."

Gurney tried to smile. "You are very kind, sir. Shall I have to join the Doctor Colonels' Mess?"

The Great Man gave him a shrewd look.

"No. You will join mine."

"That's most——"

"Nonsense, Gurney. You will be the father of the family."

And that was what the Great Man christened him, Father John, and the name clung. Father John, or even Prester John, of the Nth Division, a figure of faith and affection, and not of fun. John Gurney had to pack his kit and say good-bye to the Field Ambulance. The gave him a farewell dinner in the mess. They were sorry to lose him.

"Don't you go sending us another Bluett, padre."

"I hope there will be no more Bluetts."

"Damn it, padre," said Griggs, "I shall have to salute you. Morning, Major, morning, sir!"

"I shan't mind if you don't, old man."

"Don't old man me, uncle."

"Well, you may be made a colonel, Griggy, and then I shall have to——"

"If you ever salute me, padre, I'll smack your head."

So, John Gurney was transferred to the more stately and comfortable atmosphere of Divisional Headquarters, and became a member of the General's Mess. He put up a crown, and was saluted by his juniors, some of whom were his seniors. The news travelled to Southfleet, to Her, and to Mr. Slade, and Mr.

Slade made sure that Southfleet understood it. The Rev. John Gurney was now Major Gurney, M.C. with Bar, and the senior chaplain of the Nth Division.

No one at home thought of him as a tired little man with a secret fear in his heart. He never breathed that fear to Her.

XXXII

THEN, came the Somme, that most bloody of ordeals. John Gurney's Division was not in the first attack, but was put in in an attempt to capture a system of trenches against which all previous attacks had failed. Never had John Gurney heard such drum-fire or seen so many wounded men. Even at night the bumping of the guns continued, and the German shells wailed westwards in reply. John Gurney felt sick in the stomach. It was hot weather, and there were flies, flies and dust and strange smells. On the morning when the Nth Division was to attack, he got out of his bunk soon after dawn, and as he shaved himself his hand trembled, and he cut his chin.

Blood! He had a most strange premonition. A voice in him said: "You will be killed to-day." He listened to that voice, quaked, and defied it.

He went into the hut that was the mess, and wrote a letter to Her. He said that it would be a dangerous day, and that he had duties to do, and that whatever might happen she was to remember how he loved her. He posted that letter in the headquarters' box.

He was alone. What an infernal row those guns were making. An orderly came in to lay the table. It would be a dreadful and desultory meal, for the divisional staff were furiously occupied.

Gurney began his solitary breakfast. A dark, tired staff-officer hurried in, and sat down as though he had a train to catch.

"Afraid you'll have a busy time, padre."

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"The Seventy-Fifth had about four thousand casualties."

"Is the General——?"

"Gone up to advanced headquarters to get a better view."

Gurney drank his tea. "What time do you think I ought to start?"

"You?"

"I'm going up to be with the men."

The dark man gave him a considering look. "Is that the idea? You look a bit cheap, padre."

"Stomach a little upset."

"Why not stay, quiet? You'll have plenty to do—burying the poor dead."

John Gurney winced. "I feel more concerned with the living."

It was a serene, July day, or might have been so but for the mess modern man was making of things. A few miles away it would be so, with the wheat waist-high in the silent heat. The French orchards would be setting their fruit, and the little secret streams sucking up shadow and sunlight under the flickering poplars. Why could not man be content with simple things? Why must he play the steel monster crushing other men in his evil power-game? How absurd it all was! As if mere crude power could produce happiness. Was the school bully a happy person? Possibly. But he was an evil creature.

John Gurney plodded past those thundering Heavies, where the gunners were working stripped to the waist. The earth and the air shook, and John Gurney's stomach vibrated with them. This horrible, scarred land, torn, weedy, vividly cursed under the summer sun! He was thinking of that little English town on the edge of the sunlit sea, and of a white house with a green veranda and green shutters. Would he ever see it again? The simple man in him shuddered.

So, he went on into a world of noise, and dust, and flies, pas

lorries and guns, and brown figures waiting to be driven to the slaughter-house. A horror of it all grew in him, tainting his compassion. He was afraid.

He came to trenches, sour clefts in the earth, torn and tumbled here and there, and decorated with dreadful debris. His friends of the Ambulance would be somewhere here. He plodded on, sweating yet shivering. His steel helmet felt heavy. He began to meet wounded, bloody, brown bundles on stretchers, walking wounded smudged with blood, some with dumb, dead faces, others grinning. The damnable noise grew nearer. He could see those spouts of earth ahead of him, the brown-black fountains of the German barrage.

He met two of his old ambulance-bearers, tramping and swaying down with a stretcher. John Gurney did not look at the man on the stretcher.

"Well, Gates, hard at it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Captain Griggs up here?"

"Dug-out in the old Boche line. But I wouldn't go there, sir. Got to get through the barrage."

"You've come through it."

"Our job, sir."

Gurney had flattened himself against the trench-wall to let the stretcher pass, though these sweating bearers appeared to be in no hurry. The longer they took to carry their man down to the dressing-station the longer they would be away from the worst of the shelling. That was but human nature. Gurney watched them go swaying down the trench. What if he was to be carried down like that? But such self-pity would not do. He went on—but every few yards he had to make way for wounded men, men who could walk, and who did so with a dumb and eager haste. They had got their wounds, and were out of the bloody business. It might mean Blighty. They did not look at John Gurney, but shouldered past him.

He went on. He came to an old fire-trench, and through a gap where the parapet had been blown away he saw the open

country, and that line of shell-geysers, soil, and chalk spouting up. He stared. What horror was this! Was it not madness to face it? But he passed through the gap, and on his right saw a sunken road. Dead men were still lying there, and some live ones, crouching for cover. John Gurney turned towards this earthen trough. He sat down under a bank, took off his helmet and mopped.

His crisis was upon him.

He felt that he could not go on. And why should he go on? He was not a combatant officer whose job it was to go forward and fight, nor an M.O. whose duty was with the wounded. He—was not necessary. His facing of those bursting shells would not contribute towards a British victory. He would just go up and potter about, and be regarded as an eccentric nuisance. Duty! What was duty? Did not man humbug himself about duty? It was a kind of soothing, spiritual ointment which he applied when his soul itched.

John Gurney sat, head down in that desolate road, a hell's road, and the devil of self tempted him. Had he not endured enough? Had he not proved himself? Had he no right to cherish his survival, and to think of his duty to Her? Why risk death in a silly adventure that might be no more than vanity? He wanted to go on feeling a fine fellow, and to retain his pose as the Front Line Padre.

Gurney put on his steel helmet, and got on his feet. He would hunt up the Field Ambulance main dressing-station. He might be of some use there. He took three steps in the wrong direction, and then he paused. He saw a prone figure pressed against the bank, shoulders heaving, hands clawing the earth.

"Hullo, lad. Wounded?"

The figure turned over and sat up. Its boyish, blubbing face was smeared with soil and tears.

"I've got wind up. I've got a message. I ought to be up there."

"You're a Runner?"

"Yes, sir."

"It may be important. Come along, my lad, I'll go with you. Two's company."

The lad stared at John Gurney with wet blue eyes, got clumsily to his feet, and turned in the right direction, and John Gurney turned with him.

But it was not to be. They had not gone twenty yards when a shell that outpitched its fellows plunged into the sunken road just ahead of them. John Gurney had grown wise as to the varying sounds of shells and their significance. He shouted to the lad: "Get down, get down!" Gurney went flat as the crash came, but the Runner, as though paralysed, stood with blue eyes staring, mouth open. A fountain of earth went up. Gurney felt something strike his right leg below the knee. Was it a clod of earth or a shell splinter? There was a numbness, but no pain for the moment. When the last clod had fallen he turned and sat up. He looked for the lad. He saw a headless thing, with a raw neck spouting blood, and against the earth-bank a head. Gurney felt shocked, sick. He shut his eyes for a moment. And then he became conscious of pain. He opened his eyes and looked at his leg. It was lying at a queer angle. He was wearing puttees, and the right puttee was torn and blood-soaked. A red pool was collecting on the earth.

He had been hit. His leg was broken.

The shells had ceased to fall.

John Gurney lay flat on his back. He was in pain, but with the pain was mingled a feeling of peace. His ordeal was over. He had fought his fear, and now he could lie back and surrender. A strange serenity descended upon him. How still and peaceful everything seemed now that those guns were silent. The sunlight poured down upon him, and upon the blood that he had shed.

Brown figures began to pass up the sunken road, men carrying petrol tins, stretchers, boxes of bombs and ammunition. They passed by. Some of them glanced at John Gurney, but casually so; they did not stop to succour him. Gurney was con-

scious of sardonic surprise. He had spent himself upon many of these men, and now that he was a casualty they could not turn aside to help him. How strange! But perhaps a universal fear made men supremely selfish as well as supremely selfless.

Help was near.

"Hullo, padre, old man! Hit?"

It was Captain Smart going up with a Bearer Section. He was down on his knee beside Gurney.

"Leg, what?"

"Yes, a shell splinter."

"How long have you been here?"

"I really don't know."

"Didn't any of those fellows stop?"

"No. Jobs to do, I suppose."

"Selfish swine!"

Smart got busy. He was a veteran at this game, and his particular toy was a pair of super-scissors. He snipped through the puttee and the laces of the breeches. The Section had dressings and splints with them.

"I'm afraid I may hurt you a bit, old man."

Gurney smiled. "I don't mind. I can rest now."

"By Jove, you've earned it. A real good blighty."

"Are the bones broken?"

"Afraid so."

Smart was deft and very gentle with him. "That's it. Down you go. Sergeant Prince."

"Sir?"

"Bearers. Straight down to the M.D.S. Tell 'em to take it easy."

Smart and the sergeant and two bearers lifted Gurney on to a stretcher. The bearers adjusted their slings. Smart bent over him and smiled.

"Good luck, old man. Tell them to give you a dig down there."

"Good-bye, Smart. You've been very——"

"Rot! Go steady, you chaps. Cheerio."

John Gurney closed his eyes. Someone had tucked his haver-

sack under his head. The stretcher swayed gently. He felt at peace, utterly at peace, in spite of the pain. He was going down the line, he was going home. He had not failed in that last crisis. He could lie still and think of Her.

At the main dressing-station John Gurney was received like royalty or an honoured guest.

"The padre has come in."

Busy men gathered to look at him, and greet him.

"Bad luck, sir."

"Perhaps it's good luck."

John Gurney lay and smiled at them. He was among friends.

He was carried into a camouflaged and sandbagged marquee tucked away under a bank. He found Colonel Bruce bending over him, with that kind and ginger grin.

"Well, padre, you've got it at last. Who dressed you?"

"Smart, sir."

"Good. Much pain?"

"Yes, rather sore."

"We'll ease that."

Bruce himself gave Gurney his dose of morphia and examined the splints. A sergeant stood beside him taking John Gurney's particulars and writing out a tally.

"You'll be all right for the C.C.S., padre. I'll send you down by the next ambulance."

"Thank you for all your kindness, sir."

Colonel Bruce patted his shoulder.

"You'll be missed, padre. If you come back—we shall want you. Good luck."

John Gurney was carried out and placed in a waiting anbulance. Other cases were loaded in. Colonel Bruce stood there in the sunlight. The ambulance moved off, and Bruce saluted John Gurney.

XXXIII

JOHN GURNEY was in England, and minus his right leg. At a General Hospital in France they had found it necessary to amputate below the knee. One of the first questions Gurney had asked his surgeon was: "Shall I be able to play cricket again?" The playing of cricket might be regarded as a symbolic act, and the surgeon had reassured him.

"Of course you will, padre. They'll fit you out with a lovely substitute."

Gurney lay in bed and looked out of the window at England in September, lovely, spacious and serene. His hospital was a large country house, and John Gurney had a little room to himself. He could see a part of the garden, a great border brilliant with Michaelmas daisies and dahlias, and beyond it that English parkland, and in the distance the silver-grey Downs. Green hills, splendid trees, little shady valleys, white clouds sailing in a blue sky.

John Gurney felt very much at peace. What was a lost leg when the ordeal was over, and he had returned with honour from the field of battle? He had nothing to regret, not even that last combat with cowardice. And She was coming to see him! Oh, wonderful day! Why worry about anything? Southfleet might welcome him back. Once more he would be Mr. Jones's curate, and play cricket with his lads, and walk upon the pier, and watch London paddling in the sea. The simplicity of John Gurney's soul had not lost its savour. He had brought back with him no bitter discontents, no restless swagger, no vanity that might remain unsatisfied in the world of peace. He did not desire to be a bishop, and order the ways of other men. He would be content to be himself. He was happy with himself, which is the ultimate beatitude. And he would be with her.

"Nurse, is my hair tidy?"

"Quite," said she, and smiled upon him, knowing what the prospect was.

He was sitting up, propped against plenty of pillows. He had been shaved; he had been put into clean pyjamas. He had flowers on the table beside his bed. Surely, God had been very good to him! Everyone was surprisingly good to him. Maybe he did not know that he had been christened "The Perfect Patient".

He listened. Was that a car? She was coming by car, and was spending the night at the nearest country town. It was a car. But was it—his—car? What a child one was, and yet supremely man! He listened. There were voices in the corridor. The door opened. "Mrs. Hallard, Major Gurney." The door closed. That nurse of his had a lovely sense of tactful self-effacement.

What do two people who love each other and who have been parted say to each other on such an occasion? Not very much, perhaps, and that little is their own private affair.

"Can I sit on the bed, John? Is it safe?"

"Quite——"

"Which side is the poor leg?"

"The right side."

"Oh, my dear, if it had been——"

"I was lucky. They tell me I shall be able to play cricket."

"Of course you will. They are so clever now about—no, I won't say that——"

Gurney smiled at her.

"Wooden leg! In the old days it was a peg leg. Better than a wooden head."

They held hands and sat and looked at each other. Then, John Gurney asked her a question.

"Will you marry a man with one leg?"

"Don't be a dear silly."

"That is rather an indefinite answer. And I have another question."

"Is it serious?"

"Of course it is. Do you think dear old Jones will take me back?"

"Take you back?"

"Well, Rose, I sometimes wonder whether Southfleet wants me back. I wasn't always a success."

She looked at him with half-closed eyes, and an air of secret and tender amusement.

"Weren't you? You really are an immoderately modest person, John. Yes, I think Southfleet will want you back."

She knew more than Gurney knew about the matter, but she kept her secret, as she had promised to keep it, and the promise had been to her father.

"Now, young woman, I want my share of the fun."

Mr. Golightly had become the vicar's warden, and Mr. Slade had received elevation and had accepted the honour of serving as the people's representative. Mr. Golightly was the owner of a very comfortable limousine, and he had retained the services of an elderly chauffeur. Mr. Golightly called for Mr. Slade very early one September morning, and these two accredited delegates set off together.

"I have it here, James, I have it here."

Almost Mr. Slade winked at him. "Well, I didn't imagine you would forget it."

Major Gurney had been promoted to a wheeled chair and a room on the ground floor, and he was able to trundle himself out on the terrace and make contact with men who had suffered as he had. Legs were missing, arms were missing, or a virtue that was more fundamental than either, a belief in the essential meaning of things and the will to go on living. John Gurney had every reason for desiring to live, though he preached the life hereafter. Not that he preached to the melancholy and the maimed among his fellows. He went and sat with them, and with an assuaging and serene silence that sometimes persuaded them to open their hearts to him.

"Don't think me a rude blighter, padre, but can you see any meaning in it all?"

"I? Well yes, I can. I shouldn't have the cheek to be what I am if I didn't."

"You are a lucky man, padre."

"No, just a kid who hasn't lost the art of wondering at things, and the mystery of it all. Even that landscape is a kind of sacrament. Can you explain it?"

"Explain what?"

"Why things grow differently? Why a cedar, why a fern, why a rose bush? We haven't enough humility, old man. We think ourselves too damned clever, because we can put some little machine together. I don't think God bothers much about the cocky people. He likes you to come to him as a kid."

"Not enough humility?"

"Yes, that's it. Give up. Put out your hand and let faith take it. Something comes to one, something other than one's self."

The maimed man gazed at him with affection. Yes, there was a light in this little padre's eyes which most men seemed to lack.

John Gurney was trundling himself away from one of these heart to heart talks when the deputation appeared upon the terrace. He saw Mr. Golightly and Mr. Slade being shepherded through the Georgian doorway by the Matron. Mr. Golightly was looking suave and polished in a very sleeky-cut grey lounge suit. Mr. Slade was less ornamental, and his eyes gleamed with mischief. John Gurney paused with his hands on the wheels of his chair. His face was all lit up.

"Well, John."

"Good morning, my dear Gurney."

"This is a pleasant surprise, sir."

"Mutual, I am sure," said Mr. Golightly, with a manner dressed for some special occasion.

Mr. Golightly had a roll of paper in his hand; it might have been the charter of a new Southfleet that had become a Borough.

"This visit, my dear fellow, has—if I may say so—a double purpose. Isn't that so, James?"

Mr. Slade played up. "Yes, a very serious purpose."

"Shall we withdraw a little? To the end of the terrace."

Mr. Slade moved round to the back of John Gurney's chair and helped him to propel it towards the Georgian garden-house which

happened to be empty. There were chairs here, and Mr. Slade sat down, for he had reached an age when sitting is a virtue, but Mr. Golightly remained standing, with that roll of paper in his hand.

"We have come, my dear Gurney, to make—er—an official proposal. Mr. Jones—or I should say Canon Jones—is leaving us. He has been presented with another living."

Mr. Golightly paused and displayed the document.

"Here, my dear Gurney, I have the signatures of a great number of our parishioners. I—or we—have been in touch with the Powers that Be, and their co-operation has been—er—hearty."

Mr. Slade was looking up at Mr. Golightly with amused and mischievous appreciation.

"Well, to be brief, Gurney, we are here as representatives to offer you—the living. It is, I may say, a universal wish that *you* should take Canon Jones's place and become our vicar. Perhaps you would like to glance at these signatures?"

Mr. Golightly presented the document to John Gurney, and Gurney, holding it in both hands, smiled at these two friends.

"This—is a very great surprise to me. I—I—am most—touched—and—honoured."

Mr. Slade seemed to be enjoying a secret chuckle.

"Are you going to refuse us, John?"

John Gurney smiled at him.

"No, sir. I am not."

THE END

REFLECTIONS.

When I left the shores of England,
To answer my country's call,
I fell for the curse of Ishmael,
With the heat, the flies and all.

I'll never forget where I sailed from,
For the place was Liverpool dock,
The ship was the Dunnottar Castle,
The Altmark I thought — what a shock.

I have worked in the sun of Egypt,
Where it mercilessly pours down,
Where the Wogs themselves have wilted,
And slept — then returned to town.

To be out in the barren desert,
On a night when the moon is full,
Among the tents and the bivouacs,
That's when you feel the pull.

You think of your wife and home then,
Of the comfort that is yours by right,
But through the fault of turbulent nations,
You are sent away to fight.

I have mixed with men of all nations,
And seen combined effort without pause,
Their colour and creed make no difference,
For they fight in the Allied cause.

No men but those who suffer,
Can tell what it really means,
To live on a mess tin of gravy,
Or maybe a tin of beans.

I have been in the front of lorries,
Loaded with stores in a rush,
What a contrast to the rides in London,
On top of the old red bus.

As the war took its toll in England,
And the news from home was bad,
With the spate of V bombs and rockets,
I have known what it is to be sad.

All letters are eagerly awaited,
But you pause before slitting the top,
For they may contain cheery messages,
Then again there's a chance they may not.

This life is fraught with dangers,
So common among men of the East,
For temperaments clash without warning,
And rise up like water with yeast.

You can be friendly for years with the Arabs,
But beware of the knowledge they lack,
For at the slightest sign of trouble,
You may end up with a knife in the back.

To pray to the Prophet Mohammed,
As all Muslems are expected to do,
And then steal all day from the English,
Is their notion of prayers come true.

Oh, lands of light and shadow,
Wherein does your mystery lay,
In the mind of the Occidental,
Or a philosophy gone astray?

To look from the top of a mountain,
Or hear the howl of wild dogs,
The strange smells which assail you,
Its the life — the life of the Wogs.

I have seen historic ruins and places,
Where the dust of centuries lay,
From Palmyra to Baalbek in Syria,
To the souks down Aleppo way.

On the snows and Cedars of Lebanon,
My gaze has been fixed with awe,
And I lived in the age of the Bible,
When Jerusalem and Nazareth I saw.

Damascus I have graced with my presence,
Tripoli, Beirut and Haifa as well,
For a trip round the world in peacetime,
It's pleasure — in wartime it's hell.

When the toil of the day is finished,
There is W D property to guard,
Or else a Unit wants issues,
The work can be weary and hard.

There's a brave new world from this fighting,
Or so propaganda would tell,
Who? said a new one was wanted,
For me the old one was swell.

I ask for no medals or ribbons,
Even gratuities leave me cold,
I want to return to my homestead,
Where the days, not the nights, were bold.

Written and composed by:—
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